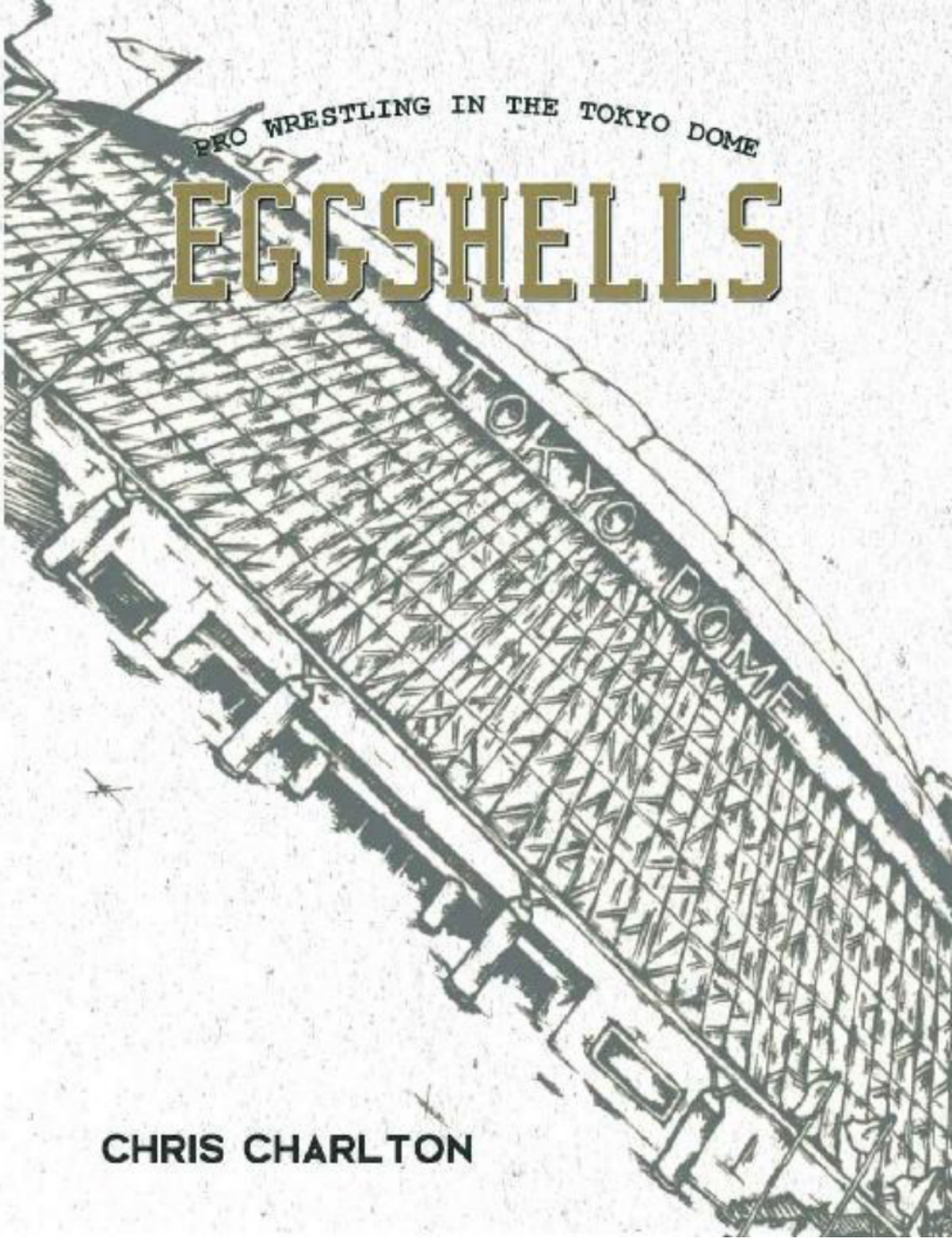
PRO WRESTLING IN THE TOKYO DOME

EGGSHELLS



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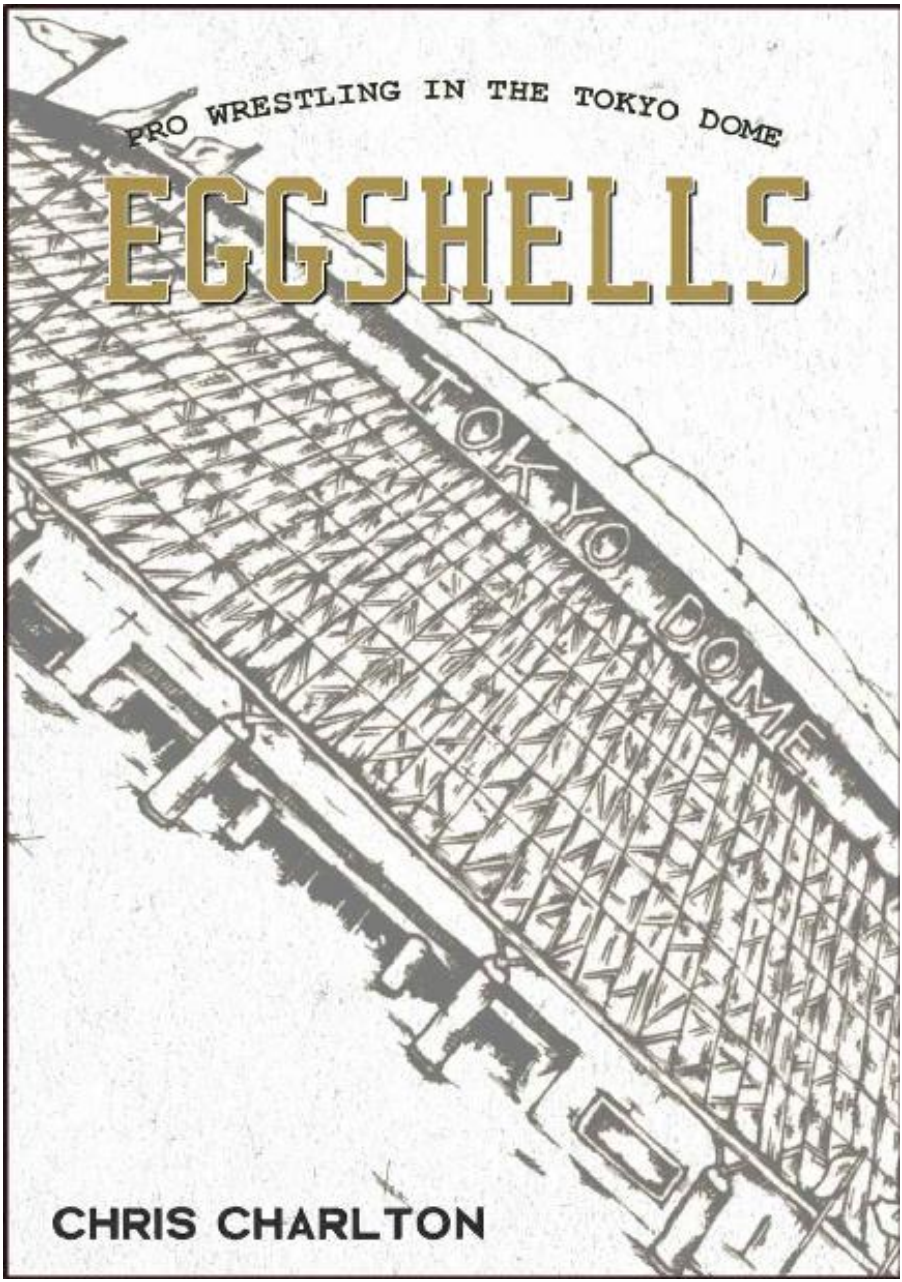
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------ DIGITAL EDITION ------

Chris Charlton

EGGSHELLS: Pro Wrestling in the Tokyo Dome

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Foreword

At 7:37 PM Japan Standard Time on January 4, 2018, New Zealand's Jay White stepped into the ring to debut in the Tokyo Dome. 558 people before him had wrestled under the shell of the Big Egg, working for a multitude of promotions in 573 matches. White was preparing to etch a new chapter in three decades of history for Japan's most recognizable arena, and the grandest stage for professional wrestling in the country.

Yet while this was the same physical place that Naoki Sano had first stepped between the ropes in back in 1989, the Tokyo Dome had taken on an all new meaning. The biggest platform for professional wrestling in Japan was now much more than that; it had taken pride of place in the entire wrestling world. This was now the career goal of wrestlers worldwide, and the venue where dreams were crafted to countless fans. To understand just how important the Tokyo Dome has become, we have to examine, not just the tale Jay White told with Hiroshi Tanahashi, but the work of all the other 558, and all those matches and events. Here is the story behind those stories, and the story of one of professional wrestling's most significant and iconic venues.

For Louis and Kyle

Under the Dome

To Tokyoites, Suidobashi is a sports Mecca, and a symbol of Japan's postwar history. Korakuen Stadium was built in 1939 and would give Suidobashi its long relationship with baseball. The sport would boom in popularity during the US occupation after World War 2, and Korakuen would become home to the Yomiuri Giants in 1949.

As the Giants moved into Korakuen, the country was steadily recovering from the physical and financial tolls of war. The stadium would be joined by Korakuen Velodrome next door, a 400m cycling track that sometimes hosted soccer games in the infield.

While the Giants were racking up 19 Central League pennants and 16 Japan Series titles in the stadium, so the country was finding its feet under a peaceful constitution and a recovering economy. Suidobashi was also gaining a connection to combat sports. Pro wrestling wasn't a mainstay in the district at first; Korakuen had been home to Rikidozan's 61-minute draw with Lou Thesz on October 10 1957, the most widely viewed television match in the medium's Japanese history. The smaller velodrome hosted Rikidozan's JWA on occasion,

too. Yet it wasn't until the 1960s that Suidobashi and pro wrestling really got to know one another.

Tokyo winning a 1959 bid to host the Olympic Games five years later was the ultimate sign of Japan's postwar prosperity. Suidobashi, like much of the city, saw a surge in construction as venues needed building, and the Korakuen Stadium and Velodrome would be joined by Korakuen Hall for boxing. Post Olympics, the 1700 seat arena would become Japan's most famous home to boxing, MMA and pro wrestling, scrawled notes and autographs on its walls radiating over half a century of history.

Rikidozan and JWA would give way to Inoki's New Japan and Giant Baba's All Japan Pro Wrestling promotions, and during a second boom in wrestling through the '70s and early '80s, Suidobashi would be a de facto home for wrestling fandom. Wrestling merchandise stores, restaurants and bars sprung up in the district, serving fans on their way to and from the Hall. Still, business wasn't at the Thesz/Rikidozan level, and Korakuen Stadium wouldn't be run by either Inoki or Baba. Even Tokyo's biggest events were held in Kuramae's sumo hall, or the Nippon Budokan, with capacity in the teens of thousands. Pro wrestling, more embedded in the popular culture than it has been since, was deemed a big and stable arena attraction, but not fit for stadiums.[1]

Then in 1986, an economic boom began, and Suidobashi would again reflect nationwide developments. After solid growth in the early part of the decade, there had been a recession through 1985 and the early part of 1986. This was due to the Plaza Accord, an agreement to depreciate the US Dollar against the Yen and German Deutsche Mark. The Yen conversely appreciated, and with Japan reliant on exports, the *endaka* (lit. ‘expensive Yen’) recession took hold. The Bank of Japan, along with policy makers, sharply curbed the Yen’s appreciation, and after recovering from the recession, a massive growth spurt occurred in the national economy.

Coupled with a baby boom generation now in their peak earning years, Japan was suddenly immensely wealthy, and keen to flash said cash. For the Yomiuri Giants, that meant a move from the stadium they had called home for 37 years. ‘There’d been plans to construct a new stadium since the early 1980s, when the economy was very strong’ remembers baseball journalist Wayne Graczyk. ‘By the time it was done in 1988, Japan was in the bubble’. The move was well timed, and well received by the Giants’ fanbase. ‘You didn’t have the history or nostalgia Koshien Stadium has to Hanshin Tigers[1] fans with the building relatively new at 37 years’.

Joined by renovated hotels and a shopping complex, the Tokyo Dome opened on March 18 1988. This was just in time for the start of the baseball season, but with the Giants’ first game taking place on April 8, the Dome was opened by an exhibition match between the Giants and Hanshin Tigers. Promotional hyperbole not limited to professional wrestling, a crowd of 56,000 was announced, despite only 46,000 seats being available. Folk rock band The Alfee, playing alongside a marching band to a crowd of 45,000 across two days, would provide the first Tokyo Dome concert. Mick Jagger would be the first foreign act inside the Dome a week later.

A wrestling promotion wouldn’t take the plunge until 1989, however, and that’s where our story starts. This is a history of 64 wrestling events held in the Dome over three decades and ten promotions. Just as Suidobashi reflects the history of Tokyo’s booming and busting economy, so does the Tokyo Dome reflect the history of the promotions that have run under its shell.

What Does the Dome Mean?

‘For a Japanese wrestler, it’s the biggest stage, and where most eyes are on you. You only have the chance to wrestle there once a year, so it has a special meaning to any Japanese wrestler’ *Kota Ibushi, Ibushi Pro Wrestling Research Institute*

‘When I first had the opportunity to wrestle there, it was in a dark match capacity and I just felt happy to be there. But the building and its events have a weight and significance. I never truly felt that until I had a championship belt. That’s when it sank in just how important performing there is.’ *Kenny Omega, New Japan Pro Wrestling*

‘It's Wrestlemania-like. The level of bigness, the level of anticipation absolutely matches that’ *Jim Ross, broadcaster, AXS TV/New Japan Pro Wrestling*

‘It’s no ordinary thing, being able to run the Tokyo Dome is not something you can take lightly. Every experience there was instrumental to me’ *Kenta Kobashi, Fortune KK*

‘That stage and that platform to me is the pinnacle of it all. The opportunity to step out in front of 46,000 people in that building is something I could only have ever dreamed about. It’s absolutely the pinnacle.’ *Rocky Romero, New Japan Pro Wrestling*

‘It’s the biggest venue in Japanese wrestling, and home to the biggest brand in Japanese wrestling, so it’s become the place that everyone in the business wants to get to.’ *Soichi Shibata, broadcaster/journalist, Proresu-today.com*

‘It is a Mecca. Everything that happens in there is instantly given more significance purely because it’s happening at the Dome. You know the biggest combat sporting events have happened here, and it has a close relationship to the history of combat sports that no other venue of that size does.’ *Jordan Breen, MMA broadcaster/journalist, Sherdog.com*

‘It’s always important to us as a business of course, but more than that, it’s hallowed ground. Shows there are events that transcend the usual wrestling audience and reach out globally. They unite people like no other events can.’ *Takashi Izumi, proprietor, Toudoukan*

‘For me, there are two places at the topmost of the business, and the Tokyo Dome is on the same level as Wrestlemania. Just stepping out onto the floor of that building, it’s surreal, it’s magical.’ *Cheeseburger, Ring of Honor Wrestling*

‘The excitement as a show approaches, you feel it in your chest. As a game director, the production, especially the entrances at the Tokyo Dome are iconic moments I want to try and reproduce’ *Tomoyuki Matsumoto, game director Spike Chunsoft (Fire Pro Wrestling World)*

‘The Tokyo Dome was a huge goal of mine since I became a wrestler. Growing up a fan of New and All Japan Pro Wrestling, my dreams were different from other kids that wanted to grow up and wrestle. For me to finish off 15 years and 86 tours of Japan by being in the Tokyo Dome in 2017, capturing that dream was like the end of a movie.’ *Steve Corino, WWE coach, former wrestler, announcer*

‘I started going to Dome shows in the early 90s as a student. I'm connected to the place, it's special. To be able to run in the Tokyo Dome validates a promotion, puts them in the large-scale elite.’
Munehiro Hashimoto, MMA/pro wrestling journalist, author

‘When promotions were able to fill the Tokyo Dome, it was a major indication that they’d struck a chord with Japanese fans. Shoot-style pro wrestling promotions running there blazed a trail for groups like Pride and Pancrase and became a cornerstone of modern MMA.’
Paul Lazenby, actor, writer, former Pancrase fighter

‘It’s a huge stage, potentially a huge number of people to be in front of… whether a venue’s big or small doesn't matter to me so much, but the matches I had there, with Baba and with Muto, they’ll stay in my heart forever’
Jinsei Shinzaki, Michinoku Pro Wrestling

‘It’s a very difficult building for sound, and yet somehow by the end of every show the place is going nuts. That's how motivated everyone is there.’ *Dave Meltzer, journalist, Wrestling Observer*

‘If you're there it's because a company has put its faith in you on their biggest stage to have the best matches. Being there means more than anything to me.’
Will Ospreay, New Japan Pro Wrestling

‘From the first moment you step foot into NJPW, your goal is to be there. The first show I saw there in 2015 I was in absolute awe, and from there it was what I was working toward and where all that work culminated.’
Jay White, New Japan Pro Wrestling

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

In the interest of consistency, the attendance figures you'll see in this book are the numbers issued by the respective promotions and may not necessarily reflect the actual attendance, paid or otherwise, for each show.

The first-hand insights quoted in this book express the views of the interviewees and may not reflect those of the author or their respective employers.

This book is in no way endorsed by or affiliated with any individual or corporate entity.

1989

New Japan Pro Wrestling

New Japan *Kakutou Eisei (*Battle Satellite) in Tokyo Dome
April 24 1989
Attendance: 53,600

Young Tokyo Dome Cup Final
Naoki Sano def. Hiro Saito

IWGP Heavyweight Championship Tournament First Round
Big Van Vader def. Masahiro Chono

IWGP Heavyweight Championship Tournament First Round
Tatsumi Fujinami def. Vladimir Berkovich

IWGP Heavyweight Championship Tournament First Round
Victor Zangiev def. Buzz Sawyer

IWGP Heavyweight Championship Tournament First Round
Shinya Hashimoto def. Riki Choshu

Mixed Martial Arts Match
Benny Urquidez v Shinya Asuka (draw)

IWGP Heavyweight Championship Tournament Semi Final
Big Van Vader def. Tatsumi Fujinami

IWGP Heavyweight Championship Tournament Semi Final
Shinya Hashimoto def. Victor Zangiev

Wahka Evloev def. Masa Saito

IWGP Heavyweight Championship Tournament Final
Big Van Vader def. Shinya Hashimoto

George Takano & Super Strong Machine def. Hiroshi Hase & Shiro Koshinaka

Jushin Liger def. Kuniaki Kobayashi

Salman Hashimikov def. Crusher Bam Bam Bigelow

Mixed Martial Arts Match
Shota Chochishvili def. Antonio Inoki

Battle Satellite was a risk for Antonio Inoki's NJPW. Questions abounded over whether professional wrestling could really be a major stadium attraction; even the company's biggest grossing event in 1976 was in an arena, the Nippon Budokan in Tokyo's Chiyoda district. With ringside seats selling as high as 300,000 Yen, that event bore the asterisk of being headlined by Inoki's infamous match with Muhammad Ali.

Lots had changed in the intervening decade. A bidding war with Giant Baba's All Japan Pro Wrestling over foreign talent had radically altered how the company, and Japanese pro wrestling at large, was booked. The formula of Japanese babyfaces wrestling foreign heels on every show, a formula used for close to four decades, would be replaced by a focus on feuds between homegrown stars.

Domestic competition wasn't the only adversity New Japan had to adapt to. A working relationship with Vince McMahon's WWF, which had been significant in orchestrating the Ali and Inoki match and broadcasting it internationally, had dissolved. Along with it came the loss of several championship titles, leading to the creation of a set of IWGP championships for tag teams, junior heavyweights and heavyweights.

More damaging to the company was having to serve a two-year ban from its home arena for major shows. After a riot at the close of 1987, where traditional floor cushions were set alight and hurled at the ring by a drunk and hostile crowd, New Japan were prohibited from running at Ryogoku's Sumo Hall.

Meanwhile, amid declining ratings from a strong early half of the decade, and a voraciously negative reaction from fans to the integration of actor/director and comedian 'Beat' Takeshi Kitano into the product, TV Asahi would strip New Japan of its primetime television spot. In place of a weekly primetime outing, NJPW was bumped to a Saturday afternoon spot, and the massive viewership it once garnered wouldn't come back.

So, this big gamble of a show would be built around three major elements. First was crowning a new IWGP champion. The title, established in June of 1987, had a turbulent first year. Inaugural

champion Antonio Inoki relinquished the belt with a fractured foot in the spring of 1988, and Tatsumi Fujinami defeated Big Van Vader to fill the vacancy. The title would be held up for a brief period that summer as Fujinami went to a no contest with contemporary and perennial rival Riki Choshu, before settling back on Fujinami. The pioneering junior heavyweight turned Inoki's anointed successor was increasingly worn down, taking a year out after this initial Dome show with a herniated disc. Before doing so, however, he would relinquish the title again in early April so that it could be decided in an 8-man tournament.

The tournament would make up seven of a huge 14 matches in the Dome, and while many bouts were brief, this was a lengthy show. It served however to shine a light on a pair of domestic figures the company had high hopes for in Masahiro Chono and Shinya Hashimoto.

While other top prospect Keiji Muto would have prolonged excursions in the west working with the National Wrestling Alliance, Chono and Hashimoto had split their 1988 between Japan and abroad. Chono, who had entered the NJPW Dojo system in spring of 1984 and debuted that October, had beaten Hashimoto to win the 1987 Young Lions Cup (a semi regular tournament in the promotion designed to further young prospects). This led to tours in Germany and the US, and while he wouldn't make a full time return to NJPW until the autumn of 1989, this IWGP tournament would mark the furthest Chono had been elevated in his five years. In the opening tournament match, Chono was beaten by eventual winner Big Van Vader who showed his propensity for agility as well as power by winning with an impressive top rope splash.

The aforementioned Ryogoku riot had occurred after Vader had debuted on NJPW's last show in 1987. His easy defeat of the heroic Inoki after a convoluted closing act of a show involving a string of changes to an anticipated card was the capper to an infuriating evening for the more inebriated members of the crowd. Still, Vader couldn't ask for a better start to his heel run, and his auspicious debut combined with imposing size and agility made him resonate with any crowd.

After giving the young hopeful Chono a glimmer of offense before handily beating him, Vader beat Fujinami in the semifinal, the hook later in the show being a guaranteed new champion. Fujinami went after Vader's arm, telling a story of neutralizing the giant's strength,

and hopes in the audience were high that the company may gamble with the relatively untested Hashimoto as champion.

Hashimoto had wrestled in Japan less than Chono during 1988, spending most of his time in Memphis, and before that, Calgary (where the Harts felt he should be pushed as a Mongolian called Hashif Khan). After only one match in his home country through '88, Hashimoto was a shocking pick to make it all the way to the finals of the tournament. As Vader made his big showy entrance, laying his strange, almost steampunk samurai helmet on the ground before his opponent and jumping in the air as it billowed steam, Hashimoto stood resolute, arms folded.

It was a hard-nosed aura that would make him one of wrestling's most imposing figures through the 90s, but as a 23-year-old with a wispy hint of a beard, it felt more like false bravado. Hashimoto's underdog status, and the damage done to Vader by Fujinami had the crowd rallying behind him. Hashimoto took the chance to show off his ability to work well with a larger opponent, getting huge reactions for striking at Vader with spinning wheel kicks, one with the big man seated on the top rope.

Vader showed his own versatility though, and with his hurt arm impeding his usual offence, landed an impressive dropkick to the youngster. Eventually, with a pair of lariats, Vader became the fourth official IWGP heavyweight champion, and the first foreigner to hold the belt.

Crowning its most prominent champion was relatively low on the priority list for New Japan in their biggest show to date, however. On top of the card was a martial arts match between Shota Chochishvili and Antonio Inoki, the centerpiece of some prime media managing and political grandstanding by the promotion's owner.

Inoki would later write[2] that ticket sales were doing well on the announcement of Battle Satellite, but had subsequently stalled. Necessary extra attention could be drawn from a deal with the Russian government. The Berlin Wall was months away from crumbling, and Japan's relationship with a soon to be post-Soviet Russia was the focus of a lot of front pages in the country. Expressing a desire to use pro wrestling to do something to advance international relations, Inoki reached out to Moscow. The result was the *Nichi/So Puroresu Kyoutei* (lit. Japan/Soviet Wrestling Agreement), and a group of Soviet former Olympians and amateur standouts working on Battle Satellite.

Soichi Shibata

The feeling at the time was that New Japan were taking a big risk. Ticket sales were doing fairly well, but there were real doubts that they could get up to 50,000 people in there. At the time, there wasn't a clear distinction between MMA and pro wrestling, and NJPW had always pushed the 'king of sports' line so hard. To bring Russian Olympians in was a chance to show off pro wrestling as a martial art, and it was generally well received by the fans.

By making a circular ring and taking the ropes down for the main event, it let the people in the dome see more easily, and you had the drama with Inoki's restricted arm. It showed consistent thought all the way around, in the ring and in production. It really showed how good New Japan was, and how good Inoki was.

The Russian contingent had one month to prepare for their first professional wrestling matches, and for the most part it showed, though matches were kept very short to hide issues. Salman Hashimikov managed to get a sizable babyface reaction from the Dome crowd in beating Bam Bam Bigelow inside of three minutes for a tidy Bam Bam payday. Victor Zangiev meanwhile was pegged as the most promising of the group as far as pro wrestling was concerned. He would be booked to go as far as the semifinals of the IWGP title tournament, and seemed more comfortable as the night went on, something that would see the former national champion parlay this night into a two-year stint as a semi regular in the company.

Headlining though was 1972 Olympic gold medalist judoka Shota Chochishvili opposite Inoki himself. The bout was for the World Martial Arts Championship, an Inoki vanity belt, created after the Ali fight and meant to maintain the company founder's legitimate image. That said, the matches over the title were anything but legitimate, and all gave Inoki a notch in the win column.

The main event attraction of Battle Satellite saw the two face off in a ring with ropes removed, and apron pulled back to create a circular ring. It was, like the prior Inoki bouts, a work, but uniquely, saw the challenger dethrone Inoki. Inoki would sell his left arm to the point of it hanging limply at his side for much of the bout, before Chochishvili scored a knockout in the fifth round.

The closing image of the show was a humbled Inoki passing his belt to the Russian, a title he made sure to win back in Osaka the next month. The media saw Inoki put the Soviets over strongly, though. The Russian experiment may have had some influence on ticket sales, but it certainly boosted Inoki's media presence as he left his full-time position with NJPW to run for public office later in the autumn. Some talk was made of Inoki sending New Japan talent to Russia in return, primarily to learn sambo in preparation for New Japan to focus more strongly on a legitimate martial arts division, but this fell through, after Seiji Sakaguchi and other members of NJPW management vehemently opposed the idea.[3]

The third major draw for Battle Satellite was the re-debut of Keiichi Yamada as Jushin Liger. Jushin Liger was an action driven anime series running on TV Asahi, and New Japan licensing the character for wrestling purposes was a smart move; leveraging a younger audience that was now watching in the Saturday afternoon TV slot was making lemonade from viewership lemons.

Yamada was struggling in the U.K. when the deal to license the character was made. After excursions in Canada and Europe, Yamada had returned to New Japan with the intention of performing under his own name. Not clicking with audiences on his return, a dejected Yamada was making one more British excursion, this time along with Dojo prospect, and Inoki favourite, Masakatsu Funaki.
When a phone call came from Tokyo to the pair's bedsit, it was Funaki, not Yamada, that the company was appealing to. Yet Funaki was set against being a masked man, and would soon enough leave the company anyway. 'Why not give it to Yamada?'[4] Funaki would suggest. A Yamada who had fallen in love with the colourful Mexican Lucha Libre approach to wrestling leapt at the chance.

So it was that the young Fukuoka native donned a red and gold body suit and mask that was directly copied from the anime series, and very different to the Liger costume fans would come to know. Reflecting on his debut, he wrote 'My first thought was "can I actually wrestle in this"... then I watched the anime to figure out what kind of character Liger was. The guy was bigger than a building, smashing monsters with a sword. I thought "it'll be pretty difficult to bring this character over.'[5]

His opponent was Kuniaki Kobayashi, a veteran junior heavyweight heel who had worked extensively with Satoru Sayama in his Tiger

Mask guise earlier in the decade. It made sense for Kobayashi to continue his stance of opposition to all things cartoonish, and cartoonish Liger was, with a lavish entrance with other characters from the TV show that was hugely camp. While the match itself was middling in quality, Liger defeating Kobayashi with a German suplex, it sparked a feud between the two (Kobayashi would try to demask Yamada in a post-match assault) and was warmly received by the crowd.

Finally, the big trivia answer for first Tokyo Dome wrestling match went to Hiro Saito and Naoki Sano. This was the finals of the Young Tokyo Dome Cup tournament, a knockout affair with an under 30 age limit that belied the fact that both finalist were already mature and accomplished hands. Saito (no relation to Masa Saito, who was embroiled in a poor match with Russian import Wahka Eveloev later on) for his part was particularly promising, having had a breakout performance in the prior year's Top of the Super Junior tournament (a precursor to the modern Best of the Super Juniors, its 1988 iteration would be won by Shiro Koshinaka). The pair put on a hard hitting and high-risk display, particularly notable for Sano sidestepping a Saito mid suicide dive, Saito colliding face first with bare concrete. Ultimately Sano would counter a Saito power bomb into a pinning combination, and become the first person victorious inside the Big Egg.

Universal Wrestling Federation
UWF U-Cosmos
29 November 1989
Attendance: 60,000

Shigeo Miyato def. Tatsuo Nakano

Mixed Martial Arts Match
Changpuek Kiatsongrit vs. Yoji Anjo (draw)

Mixed Martial Arts Match

Maurice Smith def. Minoru Suzuki

Mixed Martial Arts Match
Yoshiaki Fujiwara def. Dick Leon Vrij

Mixed Martial Arts Match
Chris Dolman def. Kazuo Yamazaki

Nobuhiko Takada def. Duane Koslowski

Mixed Martial Arts Match
Akira Maeda def. Willy Wilhelm

Seven months after Antonio Inoki and the New Japan crew leveraged licensed properties, mass media marketing, and the lure of a new champion to be crowned to draw an alleged 53,600 to the Tokyo Dome's first wrestling show, they were (in the public eye at least) matched and beaten. In fact, not only did UWF manage to claim 60,000 to the new stadium without those big hitting tools, Akira Maeda and company didn't even have a terrestrial television deal at the time to draw eyes to their product. The only way to view U-Cosmos as it happened was to show up in person to the Dome or one of just nine theatres across the country that carried the show on closed circuit, or to wait for a later, expensive edited VHS tape. An impressive outing then, especially for a company with a very short history to draw on; albeit in its second incarnation.

The original UWF had been borne from a tumultuous mid 1980s for New Japan. Just as the rivalry between New and All Japan was getting more vicious, Antonio Inoki and company management found themselves at the center of a financial scandal. Many indignant wrestlers left for Giant Baba's promotion or joined Akira Maeda and former Tiger Mask Satoru Sayama to found the Universal Wrestling Federation, along with former New Japan official Hisashi Shinma. Shinma had been designated the fall guy in the scandal, and was dumped by New Japan, but received a 25 million Yen golden parachute in the process. It was with that money that the UWF was born.

The concept for the promotion was a very straightforward approach, and a focus on martial arts. Sayama ruffled feathers by appearing on

talk show TV and slamming Inoki's breed of phony fighting, while the UWF, he promised, was the real deal. 'It was definitely born from Inoki's idea of pro wrestling being the strongest martial art,' Minoru Suzuki would reflect in 2014, 'which was primarily to oppose Baba. He couldn't compete with Baba doing the same thing, so he went down the MMA route. UWF adopted that concept (and gave it more structure)'.[6]

Sayama, Shinma would claim, was willing to walk away from pro wrestling, and was interested in indeed making the UWF into a shoot promotion. In truth, UWF matches were in the pro wrestling mould, but the bouts leading up to the predetermined finishes were much harder hitting and more legitimate than any other wrestling promotion at the time. It wouldn't take long for in ring art to be influenced by disputes in real life, and to do so at the company's topmost level.

Maeda and Sayama were at odds over the future direction of the company and how its in ring style would take shape. Sayama was also at loggerheads with a former manager of his, Shoji Koncha, who now had his hand in the running of the promotion, and who Shinma would claim, was tied to the Yakuza[7]. This all made for vicious confrontations between Maeda and Sayama in ring in the autumn of 1985. After punches and kicks were very definitely not pulled, Sayama would walk away from the company and wrestling at large while Maeda was suspended, and the promotion floundered and dissolved, most talent returning to New Japan.

New Japan would eventually stage an 'invasion' with the returning hard-nosed athletes, but all former UWF stars were on rocky ground. None more so than Maeda, who found himself in some bizarre matches, including a horrid affair with Andre the Giant. 'Maeda wanted to play along with the New Japan style, but Seiji Sakaguchi (co-founder of NJPW and booker at the time) wanted to rib him, and put Andre out there opposite him,' recalled former company board member Akehiko Age in 2014[8]. The awkward affair where Maeda grew ever more frustrated with an immobile, uncooperative and arguably intoxicated Andre has gone down in history as one of Japan's most famous 'cement matches' (a Japanese industry term for a wrestling match that breaks the fourth wall into a real and often embarrassing struggle). Yet as Maeda and company were turning a corner from the debacle into a hot angle, it all fell off the rails.

During a six-man tag in Korakuen on November 19, 1987, Maeda

blasted Riki Choshu with a kick and Choshu's face all but exploded. It would take two months for Choshu to recover, and the UWF contingent, with Maeda in particular, had already garnered a poor reputation for being hard to work with. Maeda was suspended, and on March 1 the following year, fired. 'It was an accident,' Age would say, 'any other person would be strongly warned to be more careful. But Maeda was already on thin ice'.[9] Ironically, as fans missed the UWF style, and felt sympathy for Maeda, attention only increased around the man, and the impetus for a UWF rebirth was there.

Unlike in its original incarnation, this reborn UWF didn't have a Shinma orchestrated Fuji TV deal, but they did have an extremely wealthy sponsor. Hachiro Tanaka was the president of optician chain Megane Super, a company that was flush with cash during the bubble era. Tanaka was a huge wrestling fan and set his sights on starting his own promotion. These plans were in motion already in 1989. Setting up what the Japanese business world calls a 'black ship company', Tanaka was courting talent from other promotions and making big money offers to jump ship. We'll explore the promotion they birthed later on. In the meantime, the plan was to associate the Megane Super brand with pro wrestling, and the company put significant funds into heavily branding U-Cosmos. With financial aid, and production from a company in Mother Enterprises that regularly produced live concerts, this was a slick affair. Lasers and smoke machines were glossy set dressing on an earnest in ring product that made for a big live event feel.

Paul Lazenby
It was this grandiose event that got the maximum number of eyes on Japanese shooters battling legitimate champion wrestlers, kickboxers and martial artists. Usually defeating them, too. It ignited a shoot-style wildfire, fast burning, but incredibly intense, and blazed a trail for modern MMA.

For a promotion that aimed to evolve pro wrestling ('create a brand-new dream for the 1990s' ran the company marketing), U-Cosmos was, from a booking standpoint, a throwback show. Two traditional pro wrestling encounters (under UWF rules, this meant restrictions on rope breaks, and pinfalls and submissions were joined by a technical knockout if an opponent was downed five times) and five martial arts affairs were all set up the same way. A foreign fighter was put up against a Japanese hero in every bout, evoking wrestling cards from the post war boom of the medium all the way up to the early part of the decade. While the Japanese and foreign contingents could trade

wins in the early part of the card, the semi and main event ensured the two new aces of the UWF shone.

Maeda was topmost, obviously. The star scouted by Sayama and even portrayed, in his UK excursion, as his brother (Sayama was Sammy Lee, Maeda would be under the even lazier and arguably offensive moniker of Kwik-Kik) was now the ace of a company without his earlier mentors of the former Tiger Mask or Inoki around. He would face Dutch Olympic judoka Willy Wilhelm in his only match for a pro wrestling promotion. The message was a simple page from the Inoki playbook; a foreign Olympian beaten by the Japanese ace, and handily so. Wilhelm was caught in a knee bar early in the second round, somewhat comically waving his arms and yelling in the process, before Maeda had his hand raised.

Nobuhiko Takada was built as the 1A to Maeda's top spot. Still young at 27, Takada had been wrestling for eight years, after training in the New Japan dojo under Yoshiaki Fujiwara. Takada had been earmarked for a strong run in mid 1980s New Japan, and when Sayama quit wrestling during Inoki's scandals, he was set to fill that leading junior heavyweight role. Loyalty to Fujiwara won out though, and under his mentor's invitation, Takada found himself in the original UWF along with a Sayama he'd been destined to replace.

Takada would return to New Japan, and again found himself elevated. Without the hazing Maeda had under Sakaguchi's booking, Takada was the second IWGP junior heavyweight champion. When the company grew more serious with the UWF invasion, he was a champion alongside Maeda as well, as they captured the newly created IWGP tag titles in early 1987. When Maeda was suspended and fired though, Takada would quit to follow him, and was promoted as heavily as his former partner.

His opponent for U-Cosmos was Duane Koslowski, a relative unknown amateur wrestler, who went on to a brief run through 1990 and '91 for Fujiwara backed UWF offshoot PWFG. This was one of the two 'traditional' pro wrestling matches on the card, with a UWF rule set but foregoing the MMA style rounds, and the only such match on the main card. Despite being stylistically similar to the rest of the show, it was easiest to follow as a traditional pro wrestling narrative; Takada largely dominated the outsider, who managed to reply with an impressive German suplex before succumbing to a cross armbreaker in ten minutes.

One other notable match further down the card concerned Maurice Smith and a fresh faced 21-year-old Minoru Suzuki. Maurice Smith was a world kickboxing champion at the time and went on to an impressive career in combat sports. In Japan he'd be involved with Pancrase, Rings and K-1, while also becoming the second ever heavyweight champion in the UFC, defeating Mark Coleman in the summer of 1997. At U-Cosmos, he was earmarked to elevate the third figure in UWF's triumvirate of stars in Masakatsu Funaki.

Funaki was a teenager when he joined the NJPW dojo, and was assuredly destined for greatness. His interest in martial arts saw him become fast friends with Inoki, and even having turned down the Jushin Liger gimmick that went to Keiichi Yamada, he would have been in line for a strong career in New Japan after returning from a British learning excursion.

Still, at the time NJPW was not as protective of their talent as they should have been, particularly those on learning excursions. Talent leaving the dojo to work abroad and hone their skills were operating on a handshake and a general understanding that they'd come back home. That left them liable to be poached and Funaki would not turn away his trainer in Fujiwara, accepting an invitation to join the revitalised UWF on his return to the country in the summer of 1988.

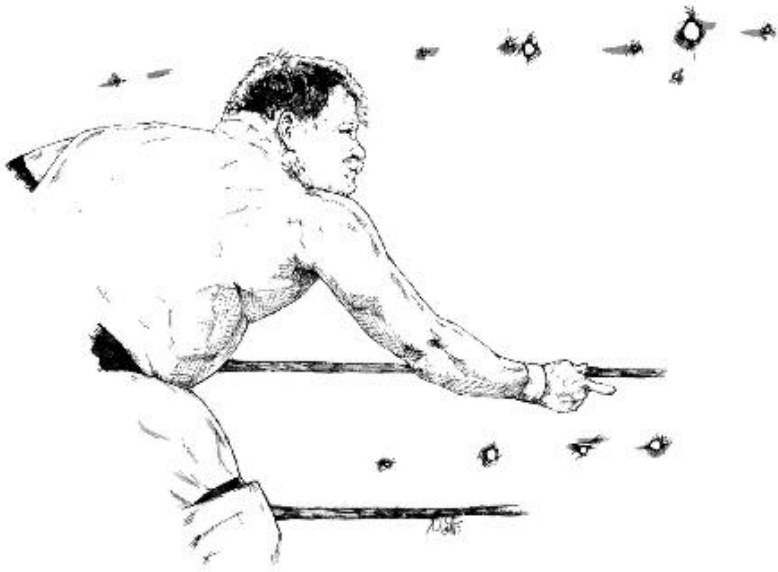
Funaki would quickly be positioned in the mix with Takada and Maeda, to the chagrin of the UWF's ace. Eventual tensions between Funaki and Maeda would see the main eventer walk, and UWF go into yet a third incarnation. For now, though, a win over an opponent with strong legitimate credibility was designed to turn him into a marketable star.

Funaki would be injured prior to November though. Sparring would see him hurt his wrist, an injury exacerbated when rushing back to the gym. Through a victory over Yoji Anjo in Sapporo one month before the Dome, his replacement was another New Japan defector. Minoru Suzuki. Though he had more of a grounded style than the athletic Funaki, Suzuki was on a similar early career path through New Japan. A product of Fujiwara, Karl Gotch and Billy Robinson's coaching, Suzuki had the distinct honour of having an early career match with none other than Inoki himself earlier in May of 1989. Inoki, coming back from the foot injury that saw him vacate the IWGP Heavyweight title, had vowed to 'start over' and work in preliminary bouts until he deemed himself worthy of being back in the main event. The 20-year-old Suzuki had been given the task of working as Inoki's personal

attendant for three months[10] before being asked to work against the boss, which spoke volumes of the teenager's prospects.

With all his trainers in the UWF's camp, however, his loyalty lay with the shoot style upstarts rather than with Inoki. On their invitation, Suzuki requested to be released from his NJPW deal, and Inoki relented. While unsuccessful as a substitute against Smith (feeling, he'd tell Shukan Puroresu in 2008, so nervous he'd wanted to flee the building[11]), his fire when trying to out grapple his striking opponent, and emotional breakdown in defeat was evidence of UWF having a young babyface star in the making, albeit with a much humbler character than the one he'd come to possess in his veteran years.

Despite the success of U-Cosmos, political and financial tensions were rife in the company. This isn't the last time we'll explore the company and its key figures, but when they appear again, it will be in a much different form.



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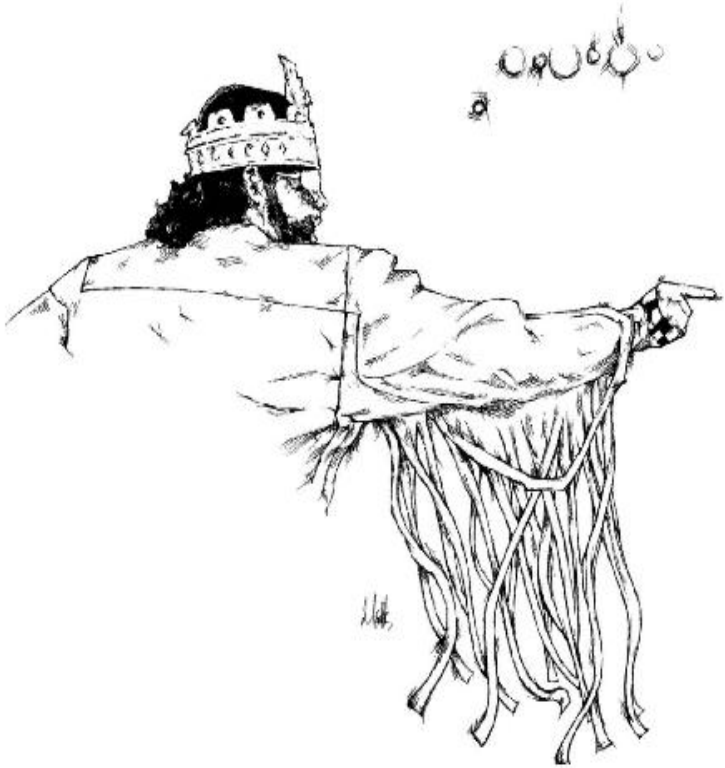
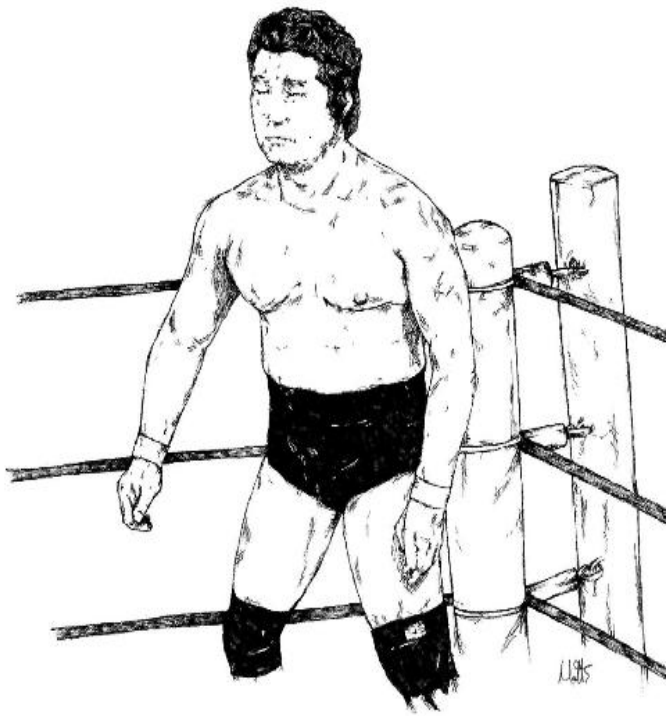




New Japan Pro Wrestling
NJPW Super Fight in Tokyo Dome
February 10, 1990
Attendance: 63,900

Takayuki Iizuka def. Osamu Matsuda

Naoki Sano & Pegasus Kid def. Akira Nogami & Jushin Thunder Liger

Blonde Outlaws (Tatsutoshi Goto, Hiro Saito & Norio Honaga) def. Hiroshi Hase, Kotaro Kashino & Kuniaki Kobayashi

Brad Rheingans def. Victor Zangiev

Steve Williams def. Salmon Hashmikov

AWA World Heavyweight Title
Masa Saito def. Larry Zbyszko

Jumbo Tsuruta & Yoshiaki Yatsu def. Kengo Kimura & Osamu Kido

Genichiro Tenryu & Tiger Mask def. Riki Choshu & George Takano

IWGP Heavyweight Title
Big Van Vader v Stan Hansen (Double Count Out)

Koji Kitao def. Crusher Bam Bam Bigelow

Antonio Inoki & Seiji Sakaguchi def. Shinya Hashimoto & Masahiro Chono

New Japan's business held firm through 1989, with a product that highlighted a promising array of junior heavyweights as well as a deep heavyweight roster, with younger stars like Shinya Hashimoto and Masahiro Chono about to break through and surpass the Tatsumi Fujinamis and Riki Choshus before them.

With a strong attendance for Battle Satellite in spring of 1989, and the success of U-Cosmos in November, the medium of pro wrestling at large was in good shape. Wrestling was, indeed, a stadium drawing attraction in Japan, defying its critics. Still though, work had to be done to make events stand out and ensure that what happened in the Dome could only happen in the Dome.

In February 1990, that special attraction was supposedly a returning Keiji Muto facing Ric Flair. The American NWA had strong ties with All Japan Pro Wrestling that lasted up through its transition to World Championship Wrestling in 1988. By now, however, AJPW's relationship had turned frosty under WCW's management by Jim Herd. As touring talent were suddenly pulled without warning, All Japan distanced itself from the outfit, and instead embarked on conversations with the WWF, who were interested in expanding into the Japanese market. WCW in turn aligned themselves with New Japan.

An NWA title match between Keiji Muto and Flair would mark a triumphant full time return for Muto to Japan after lengthy excursions to America. His position as the third musketeer of New Japan's fighting spirit, along with Hashimoto and Chono, would instantly be established. Flair had significant cache in Japan, and Muto had potential to be a top draw in the US. The match, and an associated lengthy program with Flair and Muto appeared to be win-win.

Jim Ross

Muta was a natural in the USA for WCW and was even considered for a time to be the NWA champion but that idea was blown out of the water by the booking committee.

The NJPW/WCW relationship was tenuous from the start as WCW did not have anyone in charge who knew how to interact with other promoters, especially the Japanese. Ultimately, too much would be made over the in ring creative by both sides.

With weeks to go, the match was off. Jim Herd was at the center of more disagreement on the WCW end, and Flair was out. The February show did have some promising matches, including an in-ring reunion of business partners Antonio Inoki and Seiji Sakaguchi for one last tag match against the upstarts of Hashimoto and Chono. There was, however, a lack of special attractions that could beat UWF's proclaimed attendance record of 60,000 in the building.

Enter Shohei Baba. Ever since the rift in the Japanese Wrestling Association that first saw New Japan under Inoki, and then All Japan under Baba come into being, the two groups had only worked closely together once; in a 1979 supercard hosted by the Tokyo Sports newspaper and headlined by Baba and Inoki reforming their B-I Cannon tag team for one last time.

Through the 1980s, it seemed that relations between the two promotions were downright aggressive. The change in tone in a short period of time could be levied at Mitsuo Mitsune. In New Japan, the rise of young stars like Satoru Sayama and Tatsumi Fujinami, along with Inoki at the top were seeing massive ratings for TV Asahi. In AJPW, things were less rosy. 'They were doing these huge numbers, while All Japan was in the red,' former editor in chief at Weekly Pro Wrestling magazine Tarzan Yamamoto, would recall.[12] 'So Baba reached out to (AJPW TV broadcaster) Nippon TV and they transferred Mitsune in as president. That way it was win-win for Baba; he already had other companies that were bringing in cash, and now he could hand over the All Japan debts to someone else while still drawing a salary as the top wrestler'.

Mitsune sparked a TV ratings war with Asahi by raiding foreign talent and throwing money behind the likes of Riki Choshu and others who left the company in the wake of the 1983 scandals that also birthed UWF from New Japan. The moves drew ire on all fronts. New Japan was hurt by lost talent. Many native All Japan wrestlers were finding their motivation sagging at being directed by a non-wrestling

company. Nippon TV meanwhile were increasingly frustrated with Mitsune. He was chewing through finances at an alarming rate and was asking his bosses for TV rights fees increasingly far in advance. This mirrored Nippon's frustrations with JWA in its dying days as the promotion asked for advances on rights fees up to six months ahead, a dire state of affairs that eventually led to NTV pleading with Baba to break out from his home promotion and start AJPW in the first place. NTV had had enough by 1989. They axed Mitsune, and put Baba back in charge of All Japan, giving a harsh warning in the process; no more advances, they were on their own.

So it was that Baba was eager to help Inoki and Sakaguchi with their WCW issues as they found themselves in a bind at the start of 1990. He'd lend them some talent, with the proviso that the guys he brought across would not be beaten or appear to look weak. NJPW meanwhile would play their part in a three-promotion super card in April, and both companies would be able to pull in some large gates and favourable TV ratings.

Dave Meltzer
Flair was in the middle of this big dispute with Herd and eventually decided he didn't want to go. When he pulled out, New Japan were really screwed with a huge building and no main event. Sakaguchi asked for help and Baba stepped up; it was for the best in the end since they sold the building out.

Thus Steve Williams, Jumbo Tsuruta, Yoshiaki Yatsu, Genichiro Tenryu, Mitsuharu Misawa (as the second-generation Tiger Mask, the license to Satoru Sayama's former character having been sold to All Japan in the mid 1980s), Stan Hansen, and, via the vestiges of an AWA/AJPW relationship, Larry Zbyszko all appeared in the Tokyo Dome.

The most notable, and subsequently infamous of those names was Hansen. Stan Hansen was making his return to NJPW after being a high-profile foreigner for the company in the late 1970s and early 1980s, working extensively with Inoki. He had defected to AJPW during the Mitsune instigated talent raids, and this ultimately led to a dream match with Vader on the card, a battle of the company's biggest foreign bruisers for the IWGP Championship that Vader had retained for most of 1989.

The plan was always for the two to go to a double count out in a wild brawl; that way Hansen didn't have to be beaten per Baba's

conditions, while Vader wouldn't lose the IWGP belt. What wasn't planned was an errant thumb from the short-sighted Hansen finding Vader's eye. The eye would pop out and had to be pushed in by Vader, the champion removing his mask to a massive reaction from the crowd; not at seeing Leon White's unmasked face, but rather the extent of the gruesome injury, as the eye swelled shut. The brawl continued in and out of the ring for a good while after the incident, and while some may have felt cheated by the non-finish, the violent scenes left a lasting imprint on wrestling history.

Genichiro Tenryu had just celebrated his 40th birthday a week earlier, though his career would continue for more than 25 years hence. The former sumo wrestler had entered All Japan relatively late at age 26, but his maturity and some name value from sumo made him a star for the company through the 1980s. Adopting a powerbomb and an Inoki style enzuigiri, Tenryu, along with contemporary Jumbo Tsuruta quickly became an established Japanese draw underneath Baba. Indeed, with AJPW taking a firm stand against the flirtations with MMA that the UWF (and on occasion NJPW) were making, Tenryu was part of All Japan's counter programming of U-Cosmos. The same month of November 1989 saw Tenryu, teaming with Stan Hansen, become the first Japanese wrestler to pin Baba, declaring afterward 'this is a bigger deal than anything happening at the Tokyo Dome'.

His teaming here with Mitsuharu Misawa was significant in retrospect. While Tenryu was still with AJPW, his increasing unease with management had allowed the black ship of Megane Super to sail in and offer to make him a top star of their impending promotion. As All Japan was raided by the soon to be launched Super World Sports, AJPW managed to bring younger heavyweights to the forefront, turning them into the premier heavyweight promotion of the 1990s. Among those stars was a Misawa who would shed the Tiger Mask he'd later admit he despised performing under.

For now, though, they stood opposite 14-year veteran George Takano, who also would be in SWS by the spring, and Riki Choshu. Choshu, being prepared for an IWGP title reign in the summer, was to be protected, leading to another count out on the card, this time with Misawa and Tenryu beating the 20 count to come out with the upper hand somewhat.

Larry Zbyszko represented the AWA via All Japan on Super Fight. Verne Gagne's promotion had a very strong relationship with AJPW, especially through the 1970s, informing much of their booking

practices, and providing the foreign talent on All Japan shows. Now though, the company was ailing badly. Masa Saito would defeat Zbyszko in a strong mid card match, Zbyszko working over Saito's arm for a lengthy period while Saito came from underneath with multiple backdrop suplexes as the crowd came to their feet. An inside cradle saw Saito capture the AWA title, which he'd lose again to Zbyszko in the States two months later. All the same, the AWA would be defunct by the end of 1990.

As the AWA lineage ended, a lengthy career was beginning. Along with Jushin (now Thunder, thanks to a renaming of his source anime material for its second season) Liger, Takayuki Iizuka would be the only performer on Super Fight to still be active more than a quarter century later. His suplex heavy offence was very different to the brawling style he'd adapt as a heel in the latter part of his career. Still, it would see him overcome Osamu Matsuda. Matsuda was also making his Tokyo Dome debut and would later don a mask to become influential junior heavyweight figure El Samurai.

Another debutant was Koji Kitao, though his career in New Japan would not last long. A former *yokozuna* in sumo under the name Futahaguro, Kitao had been expelled from the sport. After being physically abusive toward his younger stablemates, he would get into a fight with stable master Tatsunami and be blacklisted. To put a positive spin on events, it was announced that Kitao was retiring, and a retirement ceremony was arranged in March of 1988 in a Tokyo hotel, but with a tournament happening that same day, there was no press coverage, and no supporters showed[13].

Kitao would be trained by Lou Thesz, and prepared for a debut in the Dome. With his reputation preceding him, Kitao's debut was hotly anticipated. Indeed, to hone his skills somewhat, Kitao was sent on an excursion to the States in 1989, where he would work under a mask as Monster Machine to avoid Japanese press picking up the news. It was a different time indeed from social media quickly blowing anybody's cover.

Kitao debuted opposite Bam Bam Bigelow, clad in a red and yellow outfit that seemed extremely Hulk Hogan-esque. He was every bit the babyface in the match as well, and fan were drawn into his act, as he picked up the win over the big and versatile American. Still, Kitao's volatility would soon get the better of him in pro wrestling as well as sumo. Months later he would be fired over a backstage spat with Riki Choshu, which included a racially charged tirade (Choshu is

naturalized Japanese having been born in Korea). Still, this isn't the last we'll see of Kitao in this journey.

The main event of the show was the generational clash of Inoki and Sakaguchi opposite Chono and Hashimoto. With Lou Thesz acting as special referee, this was a changing of the guard, as the new generation of NJPW took on the company's founders. As Inoki found himself more deeply embroiled in politics, he was semi-retired at this point, and Sakaguchi had also withdrawn from full time in ring work as he took the reigns as president of the company. A month later, he would have his final match, teaming with Kengo Kimura opposite Scott Hall and Corporal Kirchner, but for now, the last time Inoki and Sakaguchi would team, and on a huge stage, made for a hotly anticipated main event.

An infamous pre-match interview with Inoki saw the New Japan founder slap a reporter across the face for daring to ask what may happen should he lose. He wouldn't of course, and while a win for the younger team would have clearly marked the passing of the torch to Chono and Hashimoto, this was more a match for Sakaguchi to bow out with a win and for Inoki to deliver his closing line of '1,2,3 Daa!'. As the match progressed though, with Chono delivering repeated enzuigiris to the master and locking him in an STF, and Hashimoto used his trademark bruising offence on both men, the path ahead for New Japan was obvious.

All Japan Pro Wrestling
All Japan Pro Wrestling/New Japan Pro Wrestling/World Wrestling Federation Wrestling Summit
April 13 1990
Attendance: 44,000

Dan Kroffat, Doug Furnas & Joe Malenko def. Samson Fuyuki, Tatsumi Kitahara & Toshiaki Kawada

Jushin Thunder Liger def. Akira Nogami

Jimmy Snuka & Tito Santana def. Kenta Kobashi & Masanobu Fuchi

Bret Hart v Tiger Mask (time limit draw)

The Great Kabuki def. Greg Valentine

Jake Roberts def. The Big Boss Man

IWGP Tag Team Championship
Masa Saito & Shinya Hashimoto def. Masahiro Chono & Riki Choshu

Jumbo Tsuruta & King Haku def. Mr. Perfect & Rick Martel

Genichiro Tenryu def. Randy Savage

WWF World Heavyweight Championship
The Ultimate Warrior def. Ted DiBiase

Andre the Giant & Giant Baba def. Demolition (Ax & Smash)
Hulk Hogan def. Stan Hansen

There was more to Giant Baba playing nice with New Japan prior to

the Superfight card in February than just turning over a new leaf for the company, or even drawing more eyes to the NTV product. In April, Baba's quest to drive business to All Japan and draw eyes to their television show would see the company's Tokyo Dome debut, and to pull it off, he called on some famous friends.

This was more than just the return event for NJPW versus AJPW, however. The Wrestling Summit would see a continuation of Japanese wrestling's relationship with the Vince McMahon led World Wrestling Federation empire, as the WWF found itself hosted by a new bedfellow.

The McMahons' relationship with Japan went back to 1975. New Japan was not a member of the American National Wrestling Alliance at its inception, struggling for vital foreign talent for a number of years before finally getting a foothold with the NWA. It was Baba that stood in Inoki's way here; the NWA had a long-standing arrangement with original Japanese promotion the JWA. While Inoki split from the JWA to form NJPW, the NWA deal was exclusive to JWA, and indeed with All Japan when Baba formed the group at Nippon TV's behest late in 1972. When NJPW finally did become a member of the NWA, Baba blocked Inoki himself from being on the board, meaning Hisashi Shinma was the go between.

Shinma struck a relationship with Vincent James McMahon at this point. The Inoki vs Ali fight was in the planning stage at this point and McMahon would arrange its western distribution, beaming it via closed circuit broadcast to Shea Stadium and a range of theatres across the States. That relationship would stretch to giving New Japan use of its copyrights for a range of titles, including Inoki's Martial Arts championship, and the WWF Junior Heavyweight championship, which was used to lend credence to Tatsumi Fujinami and Tiger Mask at home and on excursion to the New York promotion.

When Shinma was ousted from New Japan in late 1983, he was able to retain his WWF ties, which led to Akira Maeda being able to work for Vince K McMahon for a two-month spell in 1984, opposite opponents like Rene Goulet and B Brian Blair. As the original UWF collapsed though, Shinma would find himself in All Japan, and the WWF, concerned at the time with nationwide expansion in America, was without a Japanese partner.

Five years later, a WWF in strong form in the US was looking to again expand into Japan. They courted Giant Baba and an All Japan recently

free of its NWA/WCW ties. The Wrestling Summit was set to be the coming out party for this relationship, announced in a press conference early in 1990 attended by McMahon, Baba and Seiji Sakaguchi as a three-promotion joint showed New and All Japan both faced WWF's Superstars.

When it came to putting plans into action however, NJPW's relationship with McMahon soured. They wouldn't pull their talent entirely from the Summit, but refused to be a part of any interpromotional matchups. Instead, Akira Nogami faced Jushin Liger in a singles bout and Masa Saito and Shinya Hashimoto successfully defended the IWGP tag Team titles against Masahiro Chono and Riki Choshu. Adding to the spite of the move was that these bouts featured entirely New Japan talent, making their broadcast partners at TV Asahi able to prevent Nippon TV from airing them as part of their coverage of the summit.

Dave Meltzer
This was really Baba's show but Vince's people wanted to take over and they disagreed on everything. New Japan didn't want any part of it. You could tell the week of the show that there would never be another. But it's historical, All Japan, WWF & New Japan all on the same show. I don't think anyone today understands how big that was.

In place of planned New Japan versus WWF bouts came all WWF affairs, in the case of Jake Roberts with the Big Boss Man to indifference, and with Ultimate Warrior opposite Ted DiBiase to a crowd that, rarely for Japan, was more interested in entertaining themselves than following the action. This was Ultimate Warrior's first WWF title defense since famously beating Hulk Hogan at Wrestlemania 6, and Warrior's first trip to Japan; though he was originally intended for NJPW's Big Van Vader character before signing with WWF and Inoki choosing Leon White instead.

It was when All Japan and the WWF clashed that the crowd was fired up. The Japan versus the world (especially America) booking format could still prove successful, as Akira Maeda and company had found out in 1989. The international bouts on Wrestling Summit carried forth a lot of the atmosphere of a Giants baseball match, with vocal 'Ni-Pon!' Chants punctuating the action.

The veteran and rookie pairing of Masanobu Fuchi and Kenta Kobashi were an early recipient of the calls in a losing effort against Tito

Santana and Jimmy Snuka, the latter having history with both All and New Japan. Snuka was teaming with Bruiser Brody in the Real World Tag series for New Japan in 1985 when a disagreement over treatment saw the volatile Brody walk out on the company and take Snuka with him. In 1987, the Snuka/Brody combination came into AJPW, Snuka's Japanese host at the beginning of the decade.

After Brody was murdered in Puerto Rico in the summer of 1988, Snuka would team with then Tiger Mask Mitsuharu Misawa. Misawa had entered New Japan out of high school in 1981 and set a company record by debuting that August, just five months after beginning training. Three years later, and a few months into an excursion to Mexico, he received an international call from Baba. 'Can you jump up on top of the corner post?' [14]Baba asked. Misawa would reply in the affirmative. Baba subsequently had him on the earliest flight possible back to Japan, eager to have him fill the role of Tiger Mask that NTV and All Japan had just captured the license to from Inoki.

By April of 1990, Misawa was weeks away from shedding the mask and under his own name becoming one of the biggest stars wrestling created in the 1990s. For now though, he battled Bret Hart to a 20 minute time limit draw, fans appreciating the work, but booing the finish, not helped by neither man seemingly being aware time was about to run out and merely awkwardly stopping as the bell was called for.

Higher up the card, the giant combination of Andre the Giant and Giant Baba taking on Demolition was a novelty draw for many. The two were teaming up for the first time in Andre's debut for Baba after working mainly for Inoki in Japan through the 1980s. Still, it was clear neither man was particularly mobile, and the match (as with their subsequent Real World Tag League pairings through 1992) was kept short and simple.

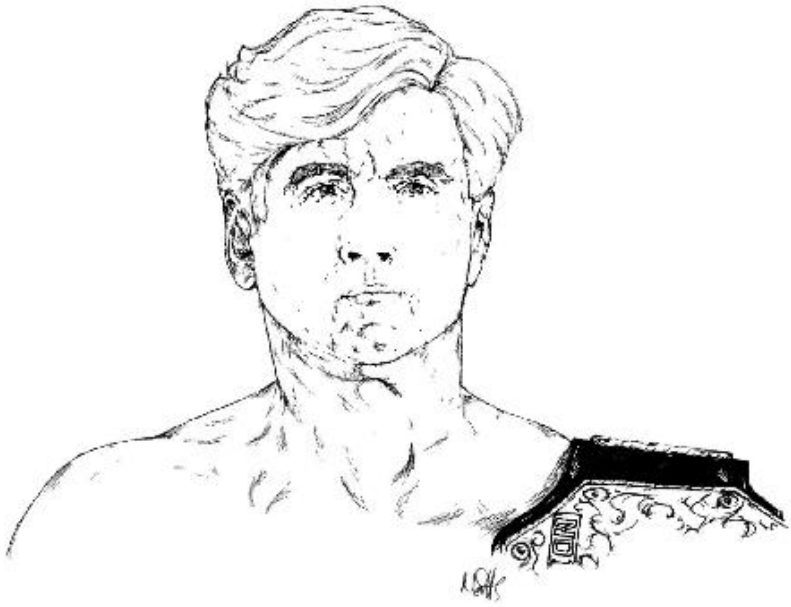
It was a pair of singles matches that really drew the eye at the Summit. Randy Savage and Genichiro Tenryu had a fantastic display, Tenryu the no-nonsense Japanese hero against a brash Savage whose heel run as the Macho King made the perfect foil.

The main event, though, was electric, a series of political and business twists and turns that created a memorable end product. Hulk Hogan was originally promoted to defend the WWF championship against Terry Gordy, a popular figure with All Japan fans, but more as a tag team wrestler as part of the Miracle Violence Connection with Steve

Williams. To fans, Gordy and Hogan wasn't a Tokyo Dome main event level match, and advance ticket sales were slow. Meanwhile Hogan dropping the WWF title to the Ultimate Warrior two weeks before the Summit created a perfect storm of issues. Gordy was unwilling to lose to Hogan, especially in a non-title match. Hogan and Gordy wasn't a huge draw; especially, again, as a non-title match. So, days before the show itself, Gordy was out and Hansen was in, creating the match that should have been made in the first place.

More than simply All Japan versus WWF, Hulk Hogan versus Stan Hansen was a battle of the two biggest American stars in Japan in the 1980s. Hansen's departure for All Japan after working with Inoki early in his Japanese career paved the way for Hogan to be a huge star in NJPW. While Hogan's super stardom in the WWF would preclude him from wrestling in Japan through much of the 1980s, his return to the country definitely sparked memories of the man that sang on disco records and scored a ton of endorsements and mainstream TV appearances when working for Inoki. Hansen meanwhile, was more than a foreign star. Instead he'd been adopted by All Japan fans as truly one of their own, making him not just a representative of AJPW in this match with WWF, but a surrogate Japanese son in this war with the epitome of Americana. There was even a simple inbuilt narrative in the ring as well: as both contenders used versions of lariats for their finish, this was a battle of the strongest arms; Ax Bomber versus Western Lariat.

The subsequent match was wild, bloody, and thrilling. Hogan and Hansen held nothing back in as reckless a brawl as Hansen's Vader bout two months earlier, only mercifully without the detached retina. Ultimately the Ax Bomber, Hogan and the WWF came out on top. WWF would continue with their Japanese experiment, but with yet another partner in 1991, as the landscape of Japanese wrestling changed significantly.



1991

New Japan Pro Wrestling
NJPW/WCW Starrcade '91 in Tokyo Dome
March 21 1991

Attendance: 64,500

Animal Hamaguchi, Kantaro Hoshino, Kengo Kimura & Osamu Kido def. Blond Outlaws (Hiro Saito, Norio Honaga, Tatsutoshi Goto) & Super Strong Machine

Kuniaki Kobayashi, Shiro Koshinaka & Takayuki Iizuka def. Brian Pillman, Tim Horner & Z-Man

Scott Norton def. Equalizer

IWGP Junior Heavyweight Championship
Jushin Thunder Liger def. AKIRA

Arn Anderson & Barry Windham def. Masahiro Chono & Masa Saito

IWGP Tag Team Championships
RIck & Scott Steiner def. Hiroshi Hase & Kensuke Sasaki

El Gigante def. Big Cat Hughes

Big Van Vader & Crusher Bam Bam Bigelow def. Doom (Butch Reed & Ron Simmons)

Great Muta def. Sting

Greatest 18 Club Championship
Riki Choshu def. Tiger Jeet Singh

IWGP Heavyweight Championship/NWA World Heavyweight Championship
Tatsumi Fujinami def. Ric Flair

If New Japan's relationship with WCW had a rocky start in 1990, issues seemed patched up by 1991. With their working relationship in place, WCW branding permeated NJPW's next Tokyo Dome appearance, down to it carrying the same Starrcade name as NWA/WCW's premier annual event.

With March 21 being a national holiday in Japan, marking the vernal equinox, timing was good for a strong Dome crowd. On the other hand, this was the first time NJPW would have to draw a house of such size without Inoki wrestling, taking a spot on the billing in an ambassadorial role. While the NWA, and WCW by association, had a greater cache with Japanese fans than WWF, this wasn't a show with the intrigue of All Japan's presence, nor the novelty of Russian guests. The onus, it seemed, was on New Japan itself to fill the Dome more than at any prior event.

In place of the proposed Ric Flair v Keiji Muto main from 1990 was a double title match with Tatsumi Fujinami opposite the NWA champion. Fujinami had returned from injury in September and quickly founded the Dragon Bombers stable with the concept being to have a group of New Japan babyfaces to cross over with All Japan on joint promoted shows going forward. Fujinami was joined by Jushin Liger, Black Cat, Takayuki Iizuka and Shiro Koshinaka, though Koshinaka would quickly turn heel on the stable's leader.

Fujinami would feud with Koshinaka for a while before rekindling a near decade old rivalry with Riki Choshu. Choshu had traded the IWGP Heavyweight Championship with Vader through the summer of 1990, and eventually held the belt until the winter, Fujinami beating his bitter enemy for his third title reign in December. Vader remained in the title picture, but one more brief run in January of 1991 would be his last before focusing his career on America, Fujinami snatching the belt back a mere 17 days before Starrcade.

Ric Flair was far from an unknown in Japan. Initially working in the country in 1973 for the pioneering IWE promotion, Flair would find a consistent Japanese home in All Japan from 1978 via their NWA connections. Flair would work on and off in Japan through the mid 1980s, last defending the NWA belt for AJPW in March of 1987.

This was his debut for New Japan, however, and his first (indeed, only as it turned out) appearance in the Tokyo Dome. The sales pitch to fans was that this was the ultimate in Japan versus America dream matches; one of the hottest homegrown babyface talents of the 1980s and freshly crowned IWGP champion taking on America's finest. While the cartoonish WWF superstars struggled to resonate with many Japanese fans, the NWA and its champion was more broadly respected.

From the point of view of the champions and companies involved,

however it was a headache. WCW was not about to remove the title from a Ric Flair they were already struggling to retain in 1991, and Fujinami, unknown to much of the American audience would be a hard sell as a main event talent. Similarly, New Japan were not willing to let Fujinami lose in front of a fiercely partisan Dome crowd.

Jim Ross
This was different from most events in that Tony Schiavone and I were there, but only to do on camera wrap arounds. We voiced over the show itself as it was being edited back in Atlanta. Fujinami was an absolute star, and the in ring creative for him versus Flair should have been very easy to craft. Instead everything was grossly over thought; a political cluster in my opinion. It was a nightmare and not the best for business.

As is often the case in professional wrestling, when no one party involved wants to lose out, the fans typically do. In this instance, it was via the NWA staple of the 'Dusty finish', named after Dusty Rhodes' propensity for using the trope in main events he booked. The double title nature of the match meant that there were two referees here; Tiger Hattori for New Japan outside the ring and Bill Alfonso for the NWA/WCW within it, the match held under NWA rules.

As the crowd were whipped into a frenzy late in the match, a bloody Flair charged at Fujinami, only to hit Alfonso instead. Fujinami then launched Ric Flair over the top rope to the floor, catching him as Flair re-entered and scoring a Hattori counted victory. The live fans went home ecstatic, thinking that Fujinami was a double champion, yet under NWA rules, with Alfonso 'watching a replay' after the fact, the dumping of Flair over the top rope constituted a disqualification. The title change would be rescinded, the matter resolved by a clean Flair victory back in the States weeks later, and all would subsequently be ignored in western history.

Underneath Flair and Fujinami was a bloody brawl over the new Greatest 18 Championship. The Greatest 18 Club was a collection of 18 wrestlers that were significant to Inoki over the course of his 30-year career as of September 1990. With Inoki now semi-retired and not defending his Martial Arts Championship, he renamed the belt the Greatest 18 Championship and awarded it to Riki Choshu as the active wrestler most fitting of carrying on his legacy.

This would spark a program with Choshu opposite Tiger Jeet Singh. Singh was the first foreign star created by Inoki and New Japan as

opposed to being imported from elsewhere with a ready-made history. His fearsome heel work made him a key rival for Inoki, leading to his inclusion in the Greatest 18 Club, but Singh would come out of retirement when Choshu was awarded the associated title, incensed that someone beneath him would be handed the belt.

Singh would have an alliance with the Blond Outlaws, a midcard heel group formed by the now heavyweight Hiro Saito and the man he debuted against, Norio Honaga, along with fellow former junior turned heavyweight brawler Tatsutoshi Goto. The stable would accompany Singh to the ring for a strange match. The bout was called a 'deathmatch' in promotion and was actually a bizarre affair decided by knockout without a referee in sight. The two brawled around the ring with plenty of weapon shots, a good deal of blood, and a good deal of bad language from Choshu, who had mastered the art of English trash talking with such Shakespearean lines as 'son of a bitch, I kill this motherfucker'. Ultimately, a Lariat from Choshu put Singh down, and the crowd delivered a ten count en masse for a strange ending to a strange match.
The knockout finish was conspicuous in not being a submission via Choshu's Scorpion Deathlock. That spot would be reserved for Sting, who faced a Keiji Muto finally making his Tokyo Dome debut. After long periods going back and forth to America, Muto had finally caught a break in the summer of 1988 working for Jim Crockett. He would be billed as the Great Muta, son of the Great Kabuki (much to the veteran's chagrin- 'I wasn't that old- couldn't I be his brother or something?' he'd complain[15]) and a big heel run would ensue. While his return to Japan to re-debut as Muta against Ric Flair was nixed, coming back under his real name in April of 1990 saw him finally hit his stride, his good looks making him popular with female and male fans alike, and announcers referring to him in his orange gear as 'the sexy Tarzan'.

Sting meanwhile was a relative unknown to Japanese fans, the surfer character played by Steve Borden having wrestled a handful of matches for All Japan in 1989, but being seen for the first time by most in the Dome. While Muta and Sting had history over the NWA World Television Title in 1989, Muto's heel persona, introduced to Japanese fans over the summer of 1990 was an odd fit for the match given fans' lack of awareness of Borden's character. Fervour over the Great Muta was at a fever pitch thanks to hot matches with Hiroshi Hase the prior winter. Images of Hase's bloody face at the hands of Muta would elevate him to a new level of popularity, and make Muta conversely despised. Yet with spectacular visual impact, and Muto's

incredible other worldly embodiment of the character, he was hard for fans to boo opposite Sting, even when flipping off the crowd on more than one occasion.

Or indeed, when spitting mist to the face of Sting, a green spew intercepting a Stinger Splash, and leading to a cross body for the win. Sting's subsequent post-match Scorpion Deathlock was more for the delight of later WCW TV viewers than the live crowd.

Muto, Shinya Hashimoto and Masahiro Chono's status as the Three Musketeers of New Japan would be solidified by the summer's first G1 Climax tournament, but at Starrcade, Muto was the star of the show, Hashimoto missing the Dome card due to injury, and Chono teaming with Masa Saito in a losing effort opposite Arn Anderson and Barry Windham. Chono's pairing with Saito was under the pretense of Masa, a veteran of US excursions, coaching the younger star as he prepared to wrestle more in the US; Chono would not find anywhere near the success Stateside as Muto did, but his star would rise at home through the 1990s.

The WCW contingent brought with it a number of notable foreign Dome debuts. El Gigante was not among them, nor were Ron Simmons and Butch Reed as Doom, a tag match against the formidable pairing of Vader and Bam Bam Bigelow merely providing a backdrop for their breakup in another angle targeted squarely at American TV viewers.

Faring better was Scott Norton, who polished off the future Dave Sullivan in WCW, The Equalizer. While his brief squash match was nothing special, his appeal to the crowd with natural strength and charisma was evident, and within a short period of time Norton would become NJPW's most loved foreign regular. The Steiners would be similarly well regarded in the country thanks to their imposing look and mix of power and athletic work. To the surprise of fans, the brothers would unseat Hiroshi Hase and Kensuke Sasaki as IWGP Tag Team Champions with a Doomsday Device like bulldog followed by a Scott Steiner Frankensteiner. All this in their first appearance in the company, and in one of the best matches on the card. The Steiners would garner a reputation for strong tag performances in the Dome over the next few years.

Their opponents' legacy would continue too. Hase had transitioned successfully to heavyweight status in 1990, and after a frightening incident where he was knocked unconscious by a Tatsutoshi Goto backdrop that summer, formed a tag team with Sasaki, and had a

rocket strapped to a babyface singles career with a pair of matches against Muta. For his part, Sasaki's four-year career found traction when teaming with Hase; a devotee of Riki Choshu's, Sasaki had joined Choshu's Japan Pro Wrestling AJPW offshoot in 1986. Following Choshu to NJPW on his mentor's return, Sasaki had excursions to Canada and Germany before returning in March 1990. Sasaki especially would be a key figure in Dome shows to come.

Super World Sports
SWS Wrestlefest in Tokyo Dome
March 30 1991
Attendance: 64618

Apollo Sugawara, Masao Orihara, Samson Fuyuki & Tatsumi Kitahara def. Don Arakawa, Fumihiro Niikura, Goro Tsurumi & Kenichi Oya

Kendo Nagasaki def Jim Duggan

Demolition (Crush & Smash) def Shinichi Nakano & Shunji Takano

Hart Foundation (Bret Hart & Jim Neidhart) def. The Rockers

(Shawn Michaels & Marty Jannetty)

John Tenta def Koji Kitao

King Haku & Ted Dibiase def Takashi Ishikawa & The Great Kabuki

Ultimate Warrior def Sergeant Slaughter

Masakatsu Funaki def Naoki Sano

WWF Intercontinental Championship
Texas Tornado def Mr. Perfect

Ishinriki & Yoshiaki Yatsu def Jimmy Snuka & The Barbarian
Randy Savage def. George Takano

Road Warriors (Animal & Hawk) def. Genichiro Tenryu & Hulk Hogan

The black ship that was Megane Super's pro wrestling venture finally set sail in the autumn of 1990. Megane Super boss Hachiro Tanaka had said that his vision for a new wrestling promotion would cost in the stratospheric region of 6-7 billion Yen. He actually came within the lower end of that range, but a six billion Yen set up cost equates to 46 million US Dollars at the time.[16]

Most of that cost went to recruiting wrestlers from other promotions, with New Japan looming largest in its sights. The biggest acquisition was set to be Keiji Muto. Muto at the time was on foreign excursion and as a result was not tied up contractually. What's more, Muto was disenfranchised after having his big return match with Ric Flair at Superfight cancelled.

After Seiji Sakaguchi's retirement match on March 23 1990, Muto approached his boss with a bouquet of flowers. He congratulated the NJPW co-founder before telling him he was leaving at the end of the month. Sakaguchi exploded and immediately telephoned Tanaka from backstage. The exact details of that conversation aren't known, but the move was blocked.

Instead, the most important piece in Tanaka's puzzle was Genichiro

Tenryu. Tenryu was growing more disgruntled as AJPW's Mitsuo Mitsune era approached its end and had differences over the direction Baba was taking the company on his return.

Soichi Shibata
Baba was steadfastly against MMA and used that to market All Japan. He had a truck drive around towns with the message that while other promotions were going for MMA, he'd protect 'real' pro wrestling, emblazoned on the side.
You had some guys like Toshiaki Kawada influenced by what UWF was doing. He would work on his kicks and strikes, but would do so almost always on his own. A lot of the veterans in AJPW would look down on him. Gradually though, through Kawada's matches, that MMA vibe found its way into All Japan in the 1990s. Tenryu, though, was very keenly attuned to what was going on and strongly wanted that hard MMA influence.

Live gates were good in All Japan. Shows were selling out, in fact, with Tenryu headlining. Tenryu never felt he had the recognition he deserved though; at the time, thinking ran in some AJPW quarters, shows were selling out before cards were even announced, so it was the brand and not Tenryu that drew houses.

This all came to Tenryu having a long conversation with Baba in April of 1991. 'If your mind's made up,' Baba said, 'there's nothing I can do to stop you'.[17] Tenryu would respond that he wanted to get bigger as a star, and create a new interpromotional war in Japan after what was dubbed 'wrestling's Berlin Wall' between New and All Japan had been broken down. Baba begrudgingly gave his blessing to what initially appeared to be an amicable split.

Tenryu would leave All Japan in April, and Megane Super quickly recruited him, initially as a spokesperson. He'd be paid handsomely for his spot as well, and while the exact amount of money Megane Super threw around wasn't public, it was said to be far in excess of what AJPW and NJPW gave out, and more in line with top flight baseball players of the era. Tenryu's popularity in the All Japan locker room meanwhile, led him to bring a wave of talent and front office referees and staff from AJPW to SWS.

With that money as incentive, other AJPW stars like Great Kabuki and Yoshiaki Yatsu would join, as well as George Takano (who wrestled as Cobra) and the shunned Koji Kitao from New Japan. Meanwhile Megane Super's connections with UWF paid off when that company

struggled.

Interior politics had again fractured the UWF. When Megane Super seemed placed to form an entirely new competing company, and not merely act as a UWF sponsor, Akira Maeda was incensed. Maeda would form Fighting Network RINGS, while Nobuhiko Takada stayed with the UWF name, now subtly rebranded Union of Wrestling Forces International, and Masakatsu Funaki, along with Minoru Suzuki and Yoshiaki Fujiwara would form Pro Wrestling Fujiwara Gumi. It was with Fujiwara Gumi that Megane Super's prior sponsorship deals parlayed into a working relationship.

The SWS roster was impressively diverse then, and seemed to unite several facets of the Japanese wrestling medium under one roof. The forward-thinking brand would also secure television under the auspices of broadcast satellite TV new to Japan. WOWOW, who would still be prominent decades later for first run TV airings of movies and UFC and other sporting events, would air monthly SWS shows. Projecting a young adult friendly image, radio DJ Kyouya Kimura would provide commentary for shows despite lacking a wrestling background. This would lead to some bizarre announcing that frequently would break from Japanese for *non-sequiturs* from Kimura in English, a common trope in Japanese radio.

While other promotions firmly pitched their tent within a certain genre of pro wrestling then, SWS was a real hybrid with a diverse roster, though one united under a hard-hitting philosophy and the 'STRAIGHT AND STRONG' branding. Early shows were presented as wars between several different factions, Tenryu leading the babyface Revolution stable against George Takano's Paraistra and booker and veteran manager Ichinose Wakamatsu's Dojo group.

Heady while this mix was, the presence of the WWF was somewhat strange. Straight and strong was the label, but when the SWS and WWF partnership was announced in November of 1990, McMahon's promotion was anything but. The cartoonish Superstars of the WWF with their light style constructed for TV and conserving bodies over 300 shows a year was an odd fit indeed.

Soichi Shibata
The plan on WWF's end was to run on their own in Japan, but just a little bit of market research would tell them that wasn't possible. The perception in the press was that there was little special about them, but as they showed a desire to buy out a

promotion in Japan, Baba and Sakaguchi closed ranks and distanced themselves from WWF.

So, for WWF, an SWS partnership was a way to continue sticking toes into eastern waters and perhaps make a move to buy. For Megane Super, the WWF names, Hogan in particular, would add a unique draw to a card Tanaka was hell bent on running at the Dome, whatever the cost. 'The Dome was in the plans from the beginning, and the WWF partnership was necessary for that,' reflected former company official Tatsumi Tominaga in 2017[18]. Tanaka was a walking stereotype of the bubble economy, going as far as to press Tominaga to try and hire Michael Jackson for office parties. 'You couldn't say no (to Tanaka),' he would remark. 'Whatever he wanted you ended up doing. When he decided on running the Tokyo Dome I told him "boss, we can't possibly get enough people in the Tokyo Dome." This was based on experience- I was selling tickets and we couldn't fill smaller buildings. He told me "well, just book people that can draw the house" and that was that'.

Wrestlefest took place a mere nine days after Starrcade, and without the marquee main events a double title match, or even the clash of foreign aces the last WWF entry into the Dome had. Three matches on the card would feature all WWF talent, and while the Hart Foundation against the Rockers was a strong display befitting the two teams' ability, the others had native fans scratching heads.

Kerry Von Erich and Curt Hennig both had some experience in the country, particularly in All Japan via NWA and AWA connections. Still, the now Texas Tornado and Mr. Perfect did not garner much investment from fans. A ref bump saw Hennig disqualified and Von Erich celebrate, despite not securing Hennig's Intercontinental Championship; this was more confusing to Japanese fans conditioned into thinking titles do change hands on count outs and disqualifications. Ultimate Warrior and Sergeant Slaughter meanwhile was a brief and tedious walk and brawl, the pair treating each other so lightly with clotheslines and chair shots as to verge on parody.

This WWF presence was far from the SWS concept, and what following the promotion may have garnered in its first months was told to expect something very different going forth. On the cross promotional front, George Takano and Randy Savage put on a good display, though with Takano not being on anywhere near the same level of stardom as Tenryu, there was less of the nationalistic fervour that surrounded Savage's Wrestling Summit match. More bizarre was

a battle of two former sumo wrestlers.

Koji Kitao had already garnered a reputation in pro wrestling that matched what he faced in sumo. Fired from New Japan after his tirade on Riki Choshu, he was nevertheless a good opponent for John Tenta at Wrestlefest. Tenta was a rare beast as a Western sumo wrestler, especially in the 1980s. In a brief eight-month career he won all 24 of his bouts and earned the nickname of 'the Canadian Rocket' before heading to the States and the WWF.

Tenta's bout with Kitao in the Dome wasn't remarkable in itself. Hardly a classic, it mainly centered around Kitao trying to knock the larger Tenta off his feet only to be frustrated. Both men's respective sumo reputations led Earthquake to be cheered heavily over Kitao, who was heckled and booed from ringside. All told though, while the match was hardly the smoothest, Tenta picked up the win.

It was a rematch the following week from Kobe World Hall that was more controversial. Kitao was frustrated at having to sell for someone who didn't stay in sumo long enough to rise through the ranks like he did. What followed in the rematch would be one of wrestling's oddest and most tense cement matches in Kobe, Kitao clearly resisting every attempt by Tenta to get the match going before trying to thumb his opponent in the eye and repeatedly tease starting a fight for real. Tenta would yell 'Come on, this is pro wrestling!' at Kitao who continued to stall. The referee deemed the bout unsalvageable and called for the bell, prompting Kitao to grab a microphone and yell at the crowd 'This is all fake! You like this fake shit?'. Kitao would subsequently be given a suspension and 500,000 Yen fine, to which the former sumo wrestler responded by quitting.

Capping off the night was a return to Japan for the Road Warriors. Regulars in All Japan up until March of 1989, Hawk and Animal's brutish strength, rough style and imposing physiques made for a popular team. They were even given a bizarre back story by AJPW, a mini movie introducing them to Japanese audiences involving a meteorite smashing into the Earth and these inhuman monsters fortunately coming across Paul Ellering who brought them to civilization to wrestle.

The teaming of SWS' de facto ace with three well liked foreign figures could have led to a spectacle, but ultimately, while this had the blood of Hogan and Hansen a year before, it had little of the heat. A count out finish, leading Tenryu and Hogan to send fans home happy with a

post-match attack felt hollow, especially with no titles at stake that might have explained the political finish.

Ultimately a strange and flat ending closed a strange and flat show, with the announced 64000 plus being at least double the actual estimated attendance. Still, SWS was in a strong and bullish enough position to run the Dome again nine months later, becoming the first company to promote consecutive shows in the building.

Super World Sports
SWS Super Wrestle in Tokyo Dome
December 12, 1991
Attendance: 40,000

Hikaru Kawabata & Hiroshi Katanaka def Nobukazu Hirai & Toshiyuki Nakahara

Apollo Sugawara, Fumihiro Nikura & Goro Tsurumi def. Akira Katayama, Don Arakawa & Kenichi Oya

Minoru Suzuki def. Wellington Wilkins, Jr.

Samson Fuyuki, Takashi Ishikawa & Great Kabuki def. Kendo Nagasaki, Shinichi Nakano & Tatsumi Kitahara

Masakatsu Funaki def. Jerry Flynn

Ultimo Dragon def. Jerry Estrada

Ashura Hara & Davey Boy Smith def. King Haku & Yoshiaki Yatsu

George Takano & Shunji Takano def. The Rockers (Marty Jannetty & Shawn Michaels)

Ted DiBiase def. Kerry Von Erich

SWS Light Heavyweight Championship
Naoki Sano def. Rick Martel

Yoshiaki Fujiwara def. Ishinriki

WWF World Tag Team Championships
The Legion of Doom (Hawk & Animal) def. The Natural Disasters (Earthquake & Typhoon)

Hulk Hogan def. Genichiro Tenryu

Hachiro Tanaka had some grand ideas for the SWS brand initially. This was Super World Sports, not Super World Wrestling, after all. This was to be Megane Super's entrance into health clubs, golf courses and more; wrestling was just the foot in the door. As the economy entered recession, that foot was turning numb by December's Super Wrestle.

The WWF was in force in SWS in late March and early April. Wrestlemania 7, with a famously underperforming Sergeant Slaughter and Hulk Hogan main event playing clumsily with tensions in the Gulf at the time, had happened on March 24. With follow up TV being taped the following Tuesday and Wednesday, the whole crew was free to travel and work in the Tokyo Dome and Kobe World Hall. As a result, Wrestlefest had a McMahon dominated theme, and an incongruous feel. With much of the WWF roster touring in mid December, it was a smaller troupe in Japan for Super Wrestle, with the result being much more cohesive.

Far more than in the spring, Super Wrestle stayed true to SWS' vision of a hybrid promotion. Minoru Suzuki and Masakatsu Funaki represented Fujiwara Gumi with a pair of matches under UWF style rules. Suzuki quickly submitted Wellington Wilkins Junior, the Canadian trained journeyman who frequented New Japan through the early 90s. Funaki meanwhile defeated Jerry Flynn, a Boris Malenko student who joined PWFG in 1991 and stayed through to 1993 before heading to the WWF and WCW. Fujiwara himself wrestled too, against the rookie Ishinriki (who interestingly got into the business via his older brother, who refereed and drove the tour bus for All Japan), though despite the younger man's best efforts, his inexperience showed with awkward offense and a perpetual goofy grin. Fujiwara appropriately no sold the less experienced man in what almost bordered on comedy more than shoot style wrestling at points.

If PWFG's MMA stylings weren't for you, a showcase match for Ultimo Dragon against Jerry Estrada may have been. Yoshihiro Asai, a teenage fan of Satoru Sayama and inspired by Tiger Mask, tried out for New Japan at age 20 in 1986. He passed the tryout but was turned down for being too short. Asai didn't give up, deciding to follow in the footsteps of fellow innovative but diminutive junior Gran Hamada and heading to Mexico. In UWA, and then EMLL (now CMLL), the now Ultimo Dragon was wildly popular. EMLL had a relationship with the

WWF at the time, and through those connections, this showcase match was put in place. With innovative high flying, including a risky quebrada over ringside barriers to Estrada and the announce team, Dragon showed the form that would make him one of Japan's most influential juniors in the 1990s.

On went the melting pot. Kerry Von Erich, the crowd now behind teases of the famous Claw, was defeated by Ted DiBiase after devious interference by Sensational Sherri in a WWF match. Hawk and Animal, now billed as the Legion of Doom, retained the WWF tag titles against the Natural Disasters, Earthquake's status with Japanese fans only helped by the Kitao incident.

When SWS and WWF crossed over, things were more smartly put together than in March. Ashura Hara was a former WWF Junior Heavyweight title challenger for Tatsumi Fujinami turned All Japan '80s mainstay. Yoshiaki Yatsu was a regular tag team partner of Riki Choshu in early '80s New Japan, and then All Japan when Choshu jumped there in 1984. Staying in AJPW when Choshu returned to NJPW, Tenryu would recruit Yatsu to SWS, and he was given a prominent spot, challenging Hulk Hogan for the WWF championship in April's Kobe show. With prominent spots in the promotion, Yatsu and Hara could have been harmed with ill-fitting tag partners visiting from the WWF. Instead, Hara was paired with Davey Boy Smith, who, with Dynamite Kid as the British Bulldogs forged a huge name in All Japan in the prior decade. Yatsu meanwhile would have King Haku as his team mate, who through AWA's connections to All Japan was a foreign staple in the company from 1980-1984, and whose legitimate toughness was already the stuff of legend. The pairing of well positioned Japanese talent with well-respected foreign stars made for a hot tag match.

Naoki Sano had wrestled the first match inside the Tokyo Dome for New Japan, but in SWS was paired initially with Masakatsu Funaki as a hard-hitting junior heavyweight. To decide the promotion's inaugural junior heavyweight champion, he faced the WWF's Rick Martel. The matchup seemed strange on paper to those familiar with Martel for his cartoonish Model character in the WWF. Martel had had a lengthy AWA title reign, however, at the expense of All Japan's Jumbo Tsuruta and was somewhat experienced in front of Japanese crowds. The resultant clash of styles, with Sano being a somewhat shoot influenced flier and Martel being a very contemporary American heel worked well in an entertaining match that allowed Sano to shine.

On top, Hogan and Tenryu wrestled a 17-minute match that was a late winner of Tokyo Sports' Match of the Year award. The pair wrestled a dual babyface bout to a rapturous Dome crowd. Tenryu was as no nonsense as ever, with some harsh chops to the WWF champion. Hogan for his part showed a level of substance on the mat he rarely needed to produce on WWF TV, the story of the early going being Hogan trying to neutralize Tenryu's stiff strikes by out wrestling him. When things inevitably broke down, Tenryu was brutal with kicks to the face and Hogan responded by wrestling with a rare anger, turning the crowd completely in his favour in the process. Tenryu resolutely kicked out of Hogan's offence, including an Ax Bomber lariat to a huge reaction, but two more would see the American star on top.

In general, it felt like the SWS Tokyo Dome product was truer to its original premise. Behind the scenes, though, the promotion was falling apart. Megane Super was feeling the pinch from the collapsing economic bubble, and Tanaka passed the pressure onto Tenryu. 'He'd tell me "we have to restructure", and leave it to me to fire these guys,' Tenryu would recall in 1999. 'Those guys would get the news from me, and then go on to Tanaka's office, where he'd pep talk them and say "all the best". So I'm looking like the bad guy.'[19] Eventually Tenryu resigned from his official position in SWS by fax on May 14 1992.

Munehiro Hashimoto
'Tenryu's strength was in his rebellious spirit. When he was in All Japan, and especially with WAR, he was a guy that liked fighting against the big dog in New Japan. So to head up SWS with all that corporate money, it didn't seem like a good fit for him philosophically.'

He'd look especially bad in the eyes of George Tanaka's Paraistra contingent. They were unhappy with company booking under (Tenryu ally) Great Kabuki and feeling like Tenryu was protecting his Revolution stablemates from budget cuts above everyone else. Just as Tenryu resigned, Tanaka attempted a coup of the company, stating that he and 13 other wrestlers would refuse to show up on upcoming cards as long as Tenryu or WWF talent were booked. Tenryu offered to put together a show of Revolution and WWF talent, but the Stamford contingent was beyond the company's budget. The May shows were canceled.

SWS limped on for another month, but was done by the summer of 1992. The remaining roster and staff fractured into the short lived Pro

Wrestling NOW and Tenryu's WAR (where the R initially stood for Romance before becoming a little more grounded). It was a tumultuous time in Japanese wrestling, though a tradition was about to begin.

1992

New Japan Pro Wrestling
NJPW Chou Senshi (Super Warriors) in Tokyo Dome
January 4 1992
Attendance: 60,000

Black Cat def. Hiroyoshi Yamamoto

Kuniaki Kobayashi & Osamu Kido def. Kantaro Hoshino & Kengo Kimura

AKIRA, Jushin Thunder Liger & Masashi Aoyagi def. Blond Outlaws (Hiro Saito, Norio Honaga & Super Strong Machine)

The Enforcers (Arn Anderson & Larry Zbyszko) def. Michiyoshi Ohara & Shiro Koshinaka

Dustin Rhodes & Dusty Rhodes def. Kim Duk & Masa Saito

Tony Halme def. Scott Norton

Shinya Hashimoto def. Bill Kazmaier

Big Van Vader v El Gigante (double count out)

Antonio Inoki def. Hiroshi Hase

Great Muta & Sting def. Steiner Brothers (Rick & Scott Steiner)

WCW World Heavyweight Championship
Lex Luger def. Masahiro Chono

IWGP Heavyweight Championship & Greatest 18 Club Championship
Riki Choshu def. Tatsumi Fujinami

New Japan's fourth Tokyo Dome event was the first to be held on January 4, a tradition that's still fastidiously protected. In Japan, without the religious traditions of Christmas, New Year's takes major precedent as a holiday. While Japanese society is hectic and hardworking, the country comes to a near dead stop for a few days either side of the calendar rolling over. Most businesses tend to restart trading on the fourth, but in 1992 this happened to be a Saturday, giving salarymen a precious extended holiday, and NJPW a chance to get the first big sports headlines of the year.

Soichi Shibata
As the years have gone on, the January 4 brand has gotten bigger and bigger for the company. Even if there are thoughts to move it away from a weekday and onto a different date, it's so embedded in the minds of wrestling fans that as long as there's a New Japan, there'll be a Tokyo Dome show on the fourth.

Tomoyuki Matsumoto
It just sounds cool. *"I tten yon"* ('One four). Now whenever I'm planning events with friends, that's how we talk about the date: "something *ten* something"!

New Japan were entering their 20th anniversary year, with the company shaping up for a major transition. While the old guard of Tatsumi Fujinami and Riki Choshu held the two top belts in the company, this was to be the Three Musketeers' time. To solidify Masahiro Chono, Keiji Muto and Shinya Hashimoto's place, the eight-man G1 Climax tournament was established. The tournament elevated all three, but particularly Chono, who scored the decisive win in the final over Muto.

The relationship between WCW and New Japan was starting its third year, with a clutch of WCW versus New Japan matches from Chou Senshi taped, given English commentary dubs and aired on American pay per view as WCW Japan Supershow 2. The working relationship between the two companies was not markedly prominent through 1991, though talent had been exchanged throughout the year, the most recent as of January 1992 being Jushin Liger capturing the WCW Light Heavyweight Championship from Brian Pillman.

With WCW's return to Japan and Muto, Hashimoto and Chono in the ascendancy, it made sense that the two agendas should meet on January 4 1992. Whether they aligned neatly with one another was a different story.

Shinya Hashimoto would face former three-time World's Strongest Man Bill Kazmaier in a cross promotional match. Kazmaier had transitioned into pro wrestling in 1986 and worked primarily for Stu Hart and Stampede, but was a largely obscure figure. Called up by WCW in the summer of 1991, he'd team with Rick Steiner to replace a hurt Scott, and on house shows would challenge for Lex Luger's WCW title but was far from a featured talent on TV. Kazmaier seemed an odd choice for a WCW representative, and the Hashimoto match didn't even make tape for the US version of the show. Its booking came from nowhere, the match ended quickly with a Hashimoto leaping DDT, and Kazmaier would disappear from wrestling entirely thereafter, instead running a gym and a fitness program for kids.

Hashimoto for his part seemed lost in the Three Musketeers mix at the time. An on again and off again tag team with Scott Norton was

immensely popular, but never to the point of having championships put on it. Meanwhile singles matches with large and unwieldy opponents like Kazmaier didn't wow hardcore fans. Yet Hashimoto would benefit in the long run from being booked opposite WCW's more physically imposing stars. During 1992, he'd find himself wrestling Tony Halme and Kevin Nash (as Oz), which built him up as a Japanese talent who could take on and beat America's super heavyweights, all on the way to longer form featured matches with the likes of Hiroshi Hase and Muto. By the time he did secure the IWGP Heavyweight championship in 1993, his resume was beyond question.

As for Muto, his ascension would be complete with an IWGP title win later in the summer, but his Chou Senshi match wouldn't suggest such a thing was in the cards. After wrestling sporadically in WCW on top of his regular New Japan schedule through 1991, he found himself teaming with old rival Sting as a now babyface Great Muta.

Muto was one half of the IWGP Tag Team champions with another former enemy in Hiroshi Hase, but with Hase involved elsewhere on the card, and WCW needing a featured match to support Lex Luger and Masahiro Chono for the WCW world heavyweight championship, Sting filled the role. Their opponents were the Steiners, Rick and Scott never having properly lost the tag belts as Muto and Hase had beaten Rick Steiner and Scott Norton when Norton substituted in for the younger Steiner.

The brother pairing was hugely popular in their own right at this point, but what surprised in this match was how little offense their face painted opponents would get. For the bulk of the match, the NWA heavyweight title contenders may as well have been a local enhancement team for a WCW TV taping, such was this match a showcase for the Steiners. Muta was relentlessly slammed and suplexed around, including a vicious German suplex from Rick as he caught a trademark Muta cartwheel elbow out the corner. Even in defeat, The Steiners were protected while Muta came off the weakest, a pin by Sting on Scott being counted while Rick covering Muta went unnoticed by the referee. It was a head scratching bout for the domestic crowd that only made sense in the context of WCW at the time, and an illustration of inter-promotional politics at work.

Chono was the highest positioned of the Three Musketeers. His semi main event position on the card was the headline of the western localized version of the show, and Chono was set for a few

appearances in the US in ‘92 and ‘93. By the summer, the NWA world heavyweight title was resurrected from the void Ric Flair left when abandoning the NWA/WCW for the WWF. Chono would be the holder of a belt more utilized as a secondary New Japan title than one in the US, but that also lent some credence to a Japanese star touring for WCW. For now though, he was challenging Luger.

The title match was a middling affair, the crowd roaring with approval at Chono’s attempts to get Luger in his STF, and at a fiery flurry of strikes from the challenger. Lengthy and largely stationary work on Luger’s limbs was less appreciated, though the crowd was suitably annoyed when Luger attempted to beat Chono by count out, and then used a low blow to lead to the finish. Luger would drop the WCW title to the more American friendly Sting the next month before jumping ship to Vince McMahon’s ill-fated World Bodybuilding Federation.

To the Japanese audience, one of the most heavily promoted matches involved Hase and Antonio Inoki. Inoki hadn't wrestled since September 1990, his unsuccessful run for public office taking up 1991. His return was built toward for several months, and with Hase embroiled in a feud with Tiger Jeet Singh, the pair would wrestle for the right to face Inoki in the Dome. That match would take place on the deserted island of Ganryujima, just off the coast of Yamaguchi Prefecture. The choice of venue was to pay homage to Inoki’s death match with Masa Saito in 1987; while this 1990s version was a trim 75 minutes long as opposed to the 125-minute original, it would still have been a demanding watch for the live crowd if there was one to see it.

Taking a brief break from politics, Inoki was nevertheless on a very limited part time wrestling schedule. As special an attraction he was, he was never going to lose to Hase. Rather, just having a singles match against the legend was a seal of approval on the mustachioed babyface, who landed a series of uranages to Inoki before the founder fired back and submitted Hase with his Octopus hold. 23 years later, the two would meet again in the upper house of Japan’s Parliament; Hase the minister of Sports and education and Inoki seeking funding for a cultural and projects ahead of the 2020 Olympics.

The main event saw Riki Choshu standing across from Tatsumi Fujinami for the 159th time and their 17th singles match together. The pair’s rivalry had started in earnest ten years prior; Choshu was a bright heavyweight prospect, but Fujinami had experienced a massive

wave of popularity as a junior heavyweight and made the transition upward. As both vied for the attention of their teacher Inoki, Choshu turned on Fujinami to spark the first real all Japanese feud in New Japan history. Breaking the mould of traditional Japan versus foreigner main events, the pair's heated rivalry had long legs; when Choshu left the company for All Japan only to return in 1987, there was even more fuel on the fire for Fujinami to go after the man who abandoned the promotion. 'Japanese fans want to see reality,' Fujinami would reflect in 2017, 'and he had this jealousy and antagonism toward me that was real. From when he first came into the company to when we wrestled, we didn't talk at all, didn't have any real conversations, we just had wrestling in common and that came through.'[20]

1991 would see Fujinami maintain the IWGP Heavyweight title in defences against Chono, while Choshu kept the Greatest 18 Club title following the death match with Tiger Jeet Singh in March. With New Japan set to use the NWA Heavyweight title as a secondary singles belt going forward, there was little need for Choshu's belt. This led to a double title match, with the added promotional promise that this would be the last ever meeting between the two.

Choshu would come out with both titles after a succession of lariats to Fujinami. Inoki would make his way to the ring and close the rivalry and the show with his trademark tell of 'Daa!'. As with all things in wrestling however, forever is too long of a time. Choshu and Fujinami had their 160th match together just four weeks later as Choshu teamed with Hase opposite Fujinami and Akira Nogami. There was more restraint in booking a singles match between the two however, that encounter coming in the December of 1994.

Finally, there was one significant Tokyo Dome debut at Chou Senshi. A 20-year-old Hiroshi Yamamoto faced Black Cat, the Mexican born veteran Mal Victor Manuel, who had entered New Japan in 1981 and handled booking duties with the company. Black Cat was not kind to Yamamoto, with a vicious second rope senton and a flying DDT for the victory. Yamamoto would be paired with stable mates Koji Kanemoto and Satoshi Kojima for most of 1992 before taking a lengthy excursion to Germany and returning under the familiar name of Hiroyoshi Tenzan.

Pro Wrestling Fujiwara Gumi
PWFG Stack of Arms
October 4, 1992
Attendance: 25,000

Ryushi Yanigasawa vs Yuki Ishikawa (time limit draw)

Joe Malenko def. Georgii Galdava

Naoki Sano def. Jerry Flynn

Bart Vale def. Aleksey Medvedev

Oleg Naniev def. Duane Koslowski

Yoshiaki Fujiwara def. Zaour Chabadze

Mixed Martial Arts Match
Kazuo Takahashi def. Superman Sattasaba

Mixed Martial Arts Match
Wayne Shamrock def. Don Nakaya Nielsen

Minoru Suzuki def. David Gobejishvilli

Masakatsu Funaki vs Maurice Smith (time limit draw)

The collapse of the first UWF was a tale of heated backstage politics holding back what was quickly becoming a wildly popular promotion and killing it far too young. Its second generation was not much longer lived. Akira Maeda had installed Shinji Jin as the president of the company. ‘While (Maeda) was still in New Japan he went on a tour to Germany’, Masakatsu Funaki would remember in 2015 ‘and met Jin there. Jin told him at the time “if you ever want to reboot UWF, I'll offer all the support I have”.’ Jin managed to negotiate lucrative sponsorship with Megane Super, and even occasional TV for the company through TBS. When the black ship of the SWS began to circle, however, Maeda felt that his and the roster’s trust was betrayed, and that his project would be gutted. In May of 1990, news circulated that Yoshiaki Fujiwara, Masakatsu Funaki, and Minoru

Suzuki would be part of SWS. This was unbeknownst to, at the very least, Suzuki, who was angered at finding out about his participation from the media with no direct communication from the companies concerned.[21]

On October 25, 1990, after beating Funaki, Maeda grabbed a microphone and criticized the UWF front office, stating 'I will beat the hell out of the people harming this company'.[22] He was given a five-month suspension for his outburst, but the rupture between wrestlers and office staff was ever widening. After what would be the last second generation UWF match on December the first, Funaki called a still suspended Maeda to the ring. A suited Maeda and Funaki appeared set to form a new company of their own. With the issues between the front office and talent being irreparably broken, a planned Tokyo Dome show on December 29 was cancelled before tickets could go on sale.

As differences between the roster at large came into play however, it was three companies, not one, that came out of UWF's dissolution after a meeting in Maeda's home in early 1991. Maeda would form Fighting Network RINGS, and Nobuhiko Takada, no longer a secondary ace to Maeda, would be the center of his own promotion in UWFi- Union of Wrestling Forces international. Yoshiaki Fujiwara though, along with his students in Funaki and Suzuki, were more open to cooperation with the SWS. After long conversations between Jin, Fujiwara and the UWF's managing director, it was agreed that the still outstanding Megane Super sponsorship of UWF would go to Fujiwara. Initially the UWF name would go to Fujiwara too, as his promotion would briefly be known as New UWF Fujiwara Gumi. To distance itself from the host promotion though, it would quickly rebrand as Pro Wrestling Fujiwara Gumi, with the first PWFG show taking place on March 4 in Korakuen.

PWFG was broadly similar in style to the promotion that birthed it and was successful in mid-size buildings in Tokyo and Kanagawa. The Tokyo Dome was a big step up from the Yokohama Cultural Gymnasium and Korakuen Hall. Meanwhile, by the time this one and only Tokyo Dome card was promoted, PWFG was already nearing its demise. In December, Funaki and Suzuki would leave, taking much of the roster with them, to found a primarily MMA focused promotion, called Pancrase. The diminished PWFG would continue, but with short cards in small buildings, until 1995.

Paul Lazenby
Funaki and Suzuki both had their own brand of superstar charisma. Funaki was like a matinee idol, and Suzuki just had an aura of evil that felt too legitimate to be fully put on. There was nothing cartoonish about who they were or what they did, so they had an air of intrigue and danger about them that made the style cool and exciting.

This show showed there was an appetite for more realistic combat spectacles. That's what led Pancrase to be the world's elite MMA promotion in the mid-90s. For my part, I saw just how legitimately evil Suzuki was in the Pancrase dojo. I spent the most painful 30 minutes of my life during an outright savaging in his hands.

For now, Stack of Arms presented ten matches to an announced crowd of 25,000. These broadly followed the template laid down by the promotion that birthed it; the focus was on strictly codified rules, including limits on rope breaks and matches ending either in knockout or submission. Meanwhile booking at the top end of the card focused on Japanese versus foreign talent. Funaki got the Tokyo Dome opponent he was supposed to face on UWF's U-Cosmos three years earlier. His bout with Maurice Smith, billed under MMA rules ended in a five-round draw that left the sparse and largely tepid crowd wanting; had PWFG continued more strongly into 1993, it would have been a well to return to.

Minoru Suzuki, a promising baby-faced youngster in 1989 was starting to gain the harder edge he'd be known for years later. In April of 1991, he had been involved with SWS' Kobe World Hall show, and, along with the infamous Earthquake versus Koji Kitao match was part of another bizarre affair on that card. Placed with Apollo Sugawara, Suzuki approached the bout as he had become accustomed to, while the IWE veteran was perhaps expecting a more 'traditional' pro wrestling match. Suzuki would deny any attempt by Sugawara to tie up and engage, and when the older wrestler let his guard down, landed some stiff blows. When Sugawara tried to start a test of strength with Suzuki and got swatted away, he grew clearly frustrated and kicked at the younger man's legs. Suzuki navigated Sugawara into the corner and struck his opponent with some brutal blows to the head leading to a long clinch. When Sugawara tried to punch at Suzuki in the corner, the referee stepped in to separate them and try to get the match moving with an admonishment to both. Sugawara, frustrated, slipped out of the ring and the referee called for the bell,

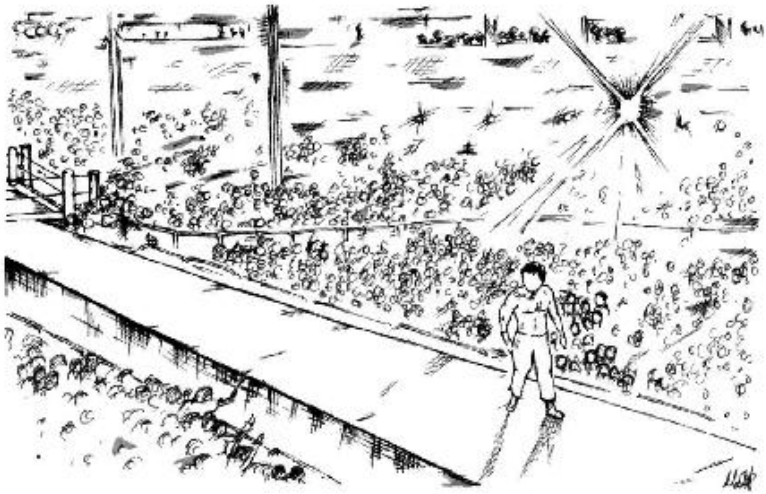
perhaps sensing the situation wouldn't improve.

Sugawara would direct his ire toward the referee and Suzuki ‘not knowing the rules’ of wrestling. To Suzuki’s credit, it only furthered his character and breed of wrestling to fans, as he countered ‘I didn't come here to do that (regular wrestling) kind of crap!’.

So it was that Suzuki, in white tights and with a towel draped over his head to give a menacing appearance, came to face David Gobejishvilli. His exuberant celebration after submitting the Russian with a heel hook perhaps was the only thing that separated him from his later evil persona.

Earlier in 1992, Suzuki had headed, with Fujiwara and Funaki, to Miami to train with Karl Gotch and Ken Shamrock. Shamrock was subsequently booked for Stack of Arms and was the only foreigner to have a measure of the crowd reaction of Fujiwara, Funaki or Suzuki. The reception Shamrock, wrestling as Wayne Shamrock received for his quick submission of Don Nakaya Nielsen would keep him in Japan. Encouraged that legitimate fights could be a successful attraction, he would be another founder member of Pancrase with his Japanese training partners.

How PWFG would have fared had Suzuki and Funaki not left that December is open to speculation, but with RINGS and UWF International as competition in a similar space, it didn't seem like the future was bright. SWS’ implosion and Megane Super’s reduced funds would have arguably scuppered Fujiwara financially, and while crowds in smaller venues were strong, Stack of Arms performed poorly with a 25,000 announced crowd, which, blacked out on TV and quiet, could easily have been smaller. Instead, Pancrase would be at the forefront of an MMA revolution in Japan, while UWFi would capture attentions via different means.



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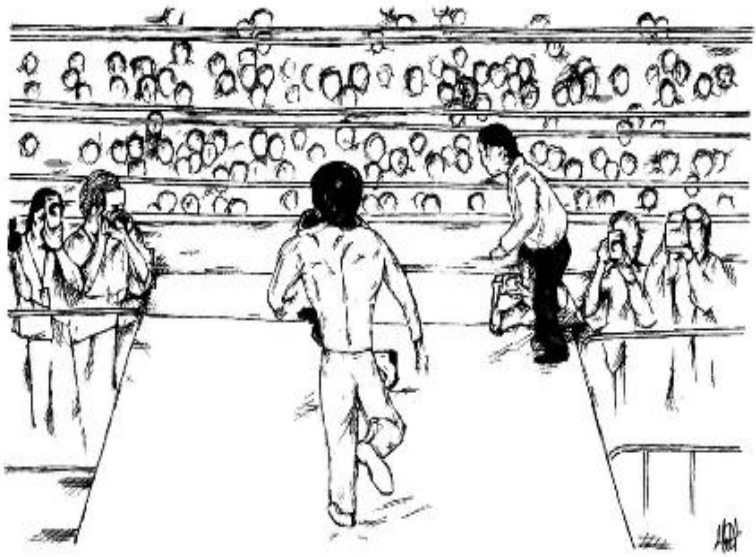
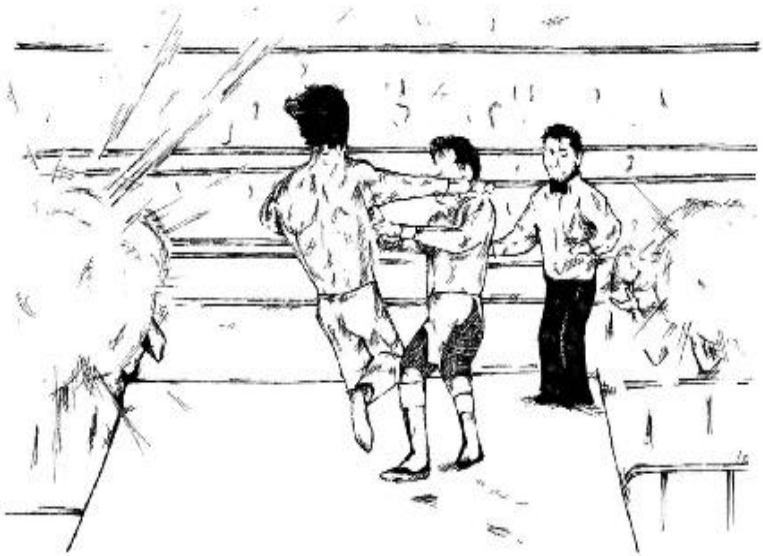




New Japan Pro Wrestling
NJPW Fantastic Story in Tokyo Dome
January 4, 1993
Attendance: 63,500

Akira Nogami, El Samurai & Takeshi Iizuka def. Koki Kitahara, Masao Orihara & Nobukazu Hirai

Heisei Ishingun (Akitoshi Saito Masashi Aoyagi, Shiro Koshinaka & The Great Kabuki) def. Raging Staff (Hiro Saito, Norio Honaga, Super Strong Machine & Tasutoshi Goto)

IWGP Junior Heavyweight Championship
Jushin Thunder Liger def. Ultimo Dragon

Ron Simmons def. Tony Halme

Sting def. Hiroshi Hase

Masa Saito & Shinya Hashimoto def. Dustin Rhodes & Scott Norton

IWGP Heavyweight Championship/NWA World Heavyweight Championship

Great Muta def. Masahiro Chono

IWGP Tag Team Championships
Hell Raisers (Hawk Warrior & Power Warrior) v Steiner

Brothers
(Rick Steiner & Scott Steiner) (double count out)

Tatsumi Fujinami def. Takashi Ishikawa

Genichiro Tenryu def. Riki Choshu

Japan was in recession by 1993, a long and deep fallout from the bubble burst that would last into the 21st century. While this would put paid to SWS, and perhaps indirectly PWFG, competition in the wrestling space was plentiful. Rather than be gutted by talent departures to Megane Super's promotion, All Japan was flourishing by creating a new generation of stars. PWFG was all but dissolved, but in its wake were two pro wrestling promotions in UWFi and RINGS with an MMA influence, as well as Pancrase promoting legitimate fights. Through the likes of All Japan Women's, women's wrestling still retained popularity it had garnered in the '80s. The pro wrestling space was still a crowded one, and New Japan would not only host WCW for the third successive Dome show on January 4 1993, but the latest contender for the consumer's Yen: Genichiro Tenryu's WAR.

Tenryu had forged strong connections with a host of other promotions through his work for SWS. As that promotion crumbled, the personable veteran was not going to let his connections or ability as promoter go to waste. The plan with Wrestle and Romance was to keep very few people on retainer, and most of those being people Tenryu was close with from SWS. The remaining talent would be cycled in and out from other promotions, lending an all-star feel to cards while managing costs.

Tenryu's positive relationships with just about everyone in the world of wrestling meant that he was able to bridge promotional rifts few others could. Tenryu would work with Atsushi Onita's bloody FMW promotion, female wrestling outfit LLPW and internationally with EMLL in Mexico. He was able to work with the WWF, appearing in the Royal Rumble in 1993 and 1994, and despite the lasting resentment between WWF and NJPW stemming from the Wrestling Summit show, would work extensively with New Japan. 'We were building toward this big Yokohama Arena show,' Tenryu recalled 'and tickets weren't selling well. I think word got through to (Riki) Choshu and he took kindness based on our old relationship. He helped a ton by lending the New Japan guys. It actually let us have matches between Japanese guys, if it wasn't for them it would have been this throwback promotion with Japanese versus foreigner cards.'[23]

Riki Choshu was booking New Japan at this point, and the two having been friends since Choshu's All Japan spell led NJPW to host and cross promote WAR through 1993 and 1994, putting Tenryu in a featured role. Over the rest of 1993, Tenryu would be in headline matches with Shinya Hashimoto, Hiroshi Hase, Masahiro Chono and Tatsumi Fujinami, but he started the year opposite his friend Choshu. With WAR competitive in matches, it would be a chance, in Tenryu's mind, to 'prove to fans that our guys could be on level footing with the top promotion at the time'. While garnering early publicity and easing the challenges of starting a new promotion, working with NJPW did cause some confusion among some fans that WAR was a subsidiary being used as a feeder system for New Japan[24]; a misconception Tenryu took as a challenge to overturn, leading to a radically different product to the big two of New and All Japan.

Choshu, with Ishin Gundan stablemates and Yoshiaki Yatsu in particular, would engage in a heated feud with Tenryu and various tag partners in the mid 1980s. Still, a singles match between the two was a fresh attraction, and with the roles reversed of promotional invader and defender, the crowd was rabid. 'It was a story of pride,' Tenryu would reflect in 2017[25]. 'Choshu never wanted to show weakness, going back to when he was young, that he couldn't seem sloppy, win or lose… This match was everything I'd imagined it would be.'

While the match itself was simple, it was rough, physical, and adored by the live crowd, who roared when Choshu's strikes gave Tenryu a hard way cut over his left eye. Tenryu would struggle to get his opponent lifted for a powerbomb, lifting Choshu halfway and then delivering on a second attempt. The resulting pinfall, framed in the context of Tenryu staying for several appearances through the year and an entry in the G1 Climax, made sense. At the time it was a shock, however. Inoki, commentating from ringside, would meet Tenryu in the ring afterward. There was a lot for the NJPW wrestlers to do to meet Tenryu on his level, the founder would say. He invited Tenryu back to New Japan for a rematch with Choshu three months later and set the scene for a main event with Inoki to kick off 1994.

Almost as heated was Fujinami's bout with WAR's Takashi Ishikawa. Ishikawa had been a consistent mid card player for All Japan through the 1980s and won a total of five Asia Tag Championships with three different partners. He was close to Tenryu, meanwhile, and Tenryu would install Ishikawa in a key back office role for SWS. He would handle a good deal of the booking along with Great Kabuki and would

continue that role in WAR. As one of the precious few contracted WAR performers, he was promoted as a major representative of the invading promotion and played a key role for ensuring both locker rooms got along smoothly. 'You had guys like Tenryu and Great Kojika come in, and it made a lot of people suspicious that they weren't just doing their own thing, that they were working as spies for Baba,' recalled NJPW front office director Katsuji Nakajima decades later. 'Ishikawa was just such a pro. He was so courteous to everyone, and his performance with Fujinami was a big contributor to the relationship working as well as it did.'[26]

In ring, Fujinami for his part was fiery and intense, moving in this match with some speed and aggression that evoked his junior days, with a tope early on to Ishikawa. Ishikawa meanwhile, was an excellent heel foil for Fujinami, delaying the gratification of seeing Fujinami's dragon screw leg whips and dragon sleeper attempts with strikes to the knee and thumbs to the eye. Eventually Fujinami would win with a pair of enzugiris and a dragon sleeper, set as he was to face Tenryu himself later in the year.

The cross promotion wasn't limited to the heavyweights. Ultimo Dragon had made his NJPW debut in November and immediately won the IWGP Junior Heavyweight Championship from El Samurai. El Samurai was himself a rising star in the promotion, the former Osamu Matsuda having returned from Mexican excursion in March and immediately reaching the finals of the Top of the Super Juniors tournament. Being someone who took the Mexican route after being deemed too small to enter the New Japan dojo initially, he shared a past with Jushin Liger.

Liger was a face of the company by 1993, a focal point of marketing and licensing who, with Muta, would share the cover of the Super Famicom video game based on the Fantastic Story event. Already a five-time IWGP Junior Heavyweight champion, Liger resonated especially with younger audiences, and as a result the junior heavyweight title was regarded at almost the same level as the heavyweight belt.

The two had a high-risk match early in the card, Dragon's springboard dive to Liger out into the row of announcers flashing back to his SWS display just over a year prior. Liger would deliver a powerbomb on the floor to Dragon to continue a brutal night for Yoshihiro Asai. In ring, Dragon would use Liger's own Liger Bomb against him for a near fall, before succumbing to a second rope DDT and a Frankensteiner.

In fact, high impact and high-risk physicality was the story of the show from its outset when young WAR prospect Masao Orihara was knocked out by a Takayuki Iizuka powerbomb. Orihara's partners tried to rally him to their corner, and the 'Tokon Trio' team of young prospects in Iizuka, El Samurai and Akira Nogami tried gamely to keep the match going, but Orihara was unmoving and the match was abruptly halted. Orihara, remarkably, would wrestle a WAR show the very next night, in a tag team main event no less.

It wasn't just WAR that NJPW was feuding with on Fantastic Story. WCW's relationship with the company continued and this would be the third and final Tokyo Dome event to air in condensed form on North American Pay Per View. Chief among the matches involving WCW talent was Sting opposite Hiroshi Hase, losing his second high profile Dome match in two years. Hase was in his first match since an infamous loss to Great Muta. Playing off their storied rivalry, and the blood Hase shed in 1990, the favour would be returned to Muta in Osaka, the blood loss going down in wrestling lore, and leaving Keiji Muto a permanent reminder in the form of the deep scar on his head. Still, high profile as they were, Hase was on a run of losses, and would be lost in the middle of the card until a strong run of performances in that year's G1 Climax.

Faring slightly better on the Japanese side against the Americans was Kensuke Sasaki. Sasaki was trying to break through in competitive times, and despite reaching the semifinals of the knockout style G1 tournament, losing to Rick Rude, it would be hard for him to break through beyond the Three Musketeers at this point. As it happened, Sasaki would find a purpose and a compelling new character as Power Warrior. The Road Warriors were set for a tour with NJPW in November of 1992 when Animal suffered a serious back injury. Hawk was introduced to Sasaki through Masa Saito and Brad Rheingans. 'He said he wanted to team with me, but I wasn't sure it'd work out,' Sasaki would remember[27]. 'I actually flew out to Minneapolis to meet with him. Talking it over he suddenly said "I know a bar with a ring in it that runs shows, let's try it and see." In this busted up old ring, I realised that it was actually something I could do.' Hawk would be paired with Sasaki, birthing the Hell Raisers.

The new team would have the IWGP Tag Team Championships bestowed upon them within the month, and hold them for the majority of 1993. In their way at Fantastic Story though were the Steiner Brothers. With the Steiners being heavily protected, and a new

team to grow, this was the battle of who would sell less, the answer usually being Hawk, as Sasaki would have to take the bulk of the punishment. Again, this was a lump-filled match, ultimately ending in a double countout to the crowd's dismay; luckily it served as a buffer between the three main events that would ensure fans soon forgot any sourness.

With WAR and the NJPW veterans occupying pole position on the card, the younger generation, and the promotion's top titles were fourth from the top. Masahiro Chono, quickly earning the nickname of Mr. August thanks to his performance in the summer G1 Climax, beat Rick Rude in the finals of the second iteration of the tournament to become NWA world heavyweight champion. This would lead to a demanding few months for Chono as he would combine his New Japan schedule with American tours; yet to adopt the leather clad cool persona he would become famous for in the next phase of his career, he struggled in front of US fans. Furthermore, a September defence against Steve Austin saw him receive a Tombstone piledriver that landed Chono directly on top of his head and cause a serious neck issue that he'd attempt to work through for years.

Keiji Muto as Great Muta, meanwhile had a commanding 1992 after an inauspicious start at the Chou Senshi show. After a rematch from the first G1 Climax finals saw him come up short against Chono in the 1992 semifinals, Muta would end Choshu's lengthy IWGP/Greatest 18 Club title reign to begin a run with the IWGP title that lasted over a year. With the NWA World Heavyweight Championship being viewed as a new secondary belt for the promotion, Muta would relinquish the now redundant Greatest 18 title to solidify his IWGP title reign. His popularity was booming, backed up with memorable performances, particularly in the aforementioned bloodbath with Hiroshi Hase.

Chono had become Muta's most legendary rival however, and this match was another memorable chapter. Muta would make use of the long entrance ramp New Japan used for Tokyo Dome shows, backing up as announcers supposed he was leaving, only to charge maniacally at Chono with a clothesline; the long camera shot of Muta's dash being etched into highlight packages and memories.

Ultimately, Muta would pin Chono with two moonsaults to hold both the IWGP and NWA titles simultaneously; the second person to do so after Fujinami, and this time the American side of the NJPW/WCW relationship recognised the change. Still, it was short lived. WCW were looking to make a break from the NWA and the licenses they had

to pay for the rights to the title. NJPW were happy to consolidate their title situation as well. Muta quietly dropped the NWA title to Barry Windham in America that February before WCW and NWA severed ties. It wouldn't be the last time the NWA would have a presence of some sort in the Tokyo Dome, but it would be the last time for a long time.

1994

憧夢超女大戦

New Japan Pro Wrestling
NJPW Battlefield in Tokyo Dome
January 4 1994
Attendance: 62,000

Heisei Ishingun (Kengo Kimura, Kuniaki Kobayashi, Michiyoshi Ohara, Shiro Koshinaka & The Great Kabuki) def. El Samuari, Manabu Nakanishi, Osamu Kido, Satoshi Kojima & Yuji Nagata

JJ Jacks (Akira Nogami & Takayuki Iizuka) def. Heisei Ishingun (Akitoshi Saito & Masashi Aoyagi)

Brutus Beefcake def. Black Cat

Super Strong Machine def. Tatsutoshi Goto

Jushin Thunder Liger def. Tiger Mask

IWGP Tag Team Championships
Hell Raisers (Hawk Warrior & Power Warrior) def. Jurassic Powers (Scott Norton & Hercules Hernandez)

Steiner Brothers (Rick & Scott Steiner) def. Hiroshi Hase & Keiji Muto

Hulk Hogan def. Tatsumi Fujinami

Riki Choshu def. Yoshiaki Fujiwara

IWGP Heavyweight Championship
Shinya Hashimoto def. Masahiro Chono

Genichiro Tenryu def. Antonio Inoki

‘It felt like a test.’ That's how Genichiro Tenryu later reflected on his match with Antonio Inoki. ‘Forgetting about what he did to brand himself as unique, I spent a lot of my career doing enzuigiris, trying to get his approval. “How about this? Mr. Inoki?”. He set this up, in the Tokyo Dome as well, to say “let's see what you're made of”.’[28]

The test came down to more than just Tenryu being influenced by Inoki’s style, adopting his trademark head kick because nobody was using the move in All Japan. With the main event of Battlefield ‘94

booked a year in advance, Inoki was testing Tenryu's acumen as a businessman and promoter too. The match would have happened regardless, but would WAR and the interpromotional program with NJPW stay alive through 1993 and up to its second Tokyo Dome show? Or would it suffer the same fate as SWS, or the second UWF?

As it happened, Tenryu was successful. The 47 shows WAR ran through 1993 was a modest number compared to the 125 New Japan and 153 All Japan shows over the same period. Yet houses were full, from the standby of Korakuen Hall to 10,100 in Ryogoku Kokugikan. The numbers were helped by working relations with New Japan and the WWF, but WAR was also distinct; its own animal, an evolution of the hybrid concept SWS proposed that felt fresh, if not revolutionary.

Kota Ibushi
The first wrestling I ever saw was from the WAR v New Japan rivalry. I was in fifth grade and I loved anime at the time, Dragon Ball especially. This was like a real-life version of Dragon Ball. I decided to become a wrestler about a month later.

So, WAR passed Inoki's test outside of the ring, leading to a tale of Tenryu being tested within it. The main event of Battlefield '94 was a reasonably brief affair but full of drama and a compelling narrative. Inoki literally tested Tenryu at the outset with the traditional test of strength, before popping the WAR boss in the face with a closed fist, testing Tenryu's jaw after his raw power. Inoki went in for a rear naked choke on Tenryu barely four minutes into the match, and Tenryu seemed to be completely out of things, laying flat and unmoving on his back. Inoki backed away to the corner. Referee Tiger Hattori called for a bell only to be stopped by an enraged Riki Choshu yelling 'Don't even think about it you son of a bitch!'; this too was a test, the story of testing Tenryu's resolve, and Choshu sensing there was more in the man that bested him one year prior.

The break in the match for what felt like an eternity made Tenryu's subsequent comeback with enzuigiris and sumo-like open palm strikes all that much more thrilling. The crowd came to their feet as the two veterans exchanged ever more vicious strikes, and then watched stunned as Tenryu pinned Inoki with a powerbomb.

Tenryu had become the first, and as it would happen, only Japanese performer to score pinfalls over both Inoki and Giant Baba. It was a hugely significant moment for the 43-year-old Tenryu, who had his spot cemented in wrestling history with the win. For Inoki conversely,

who was increasingly selective with wrestling at all, let alone losing, this was a big deal. Inoki would come to his feet, shake Tenryu by the hand, and stand in the ring flanked by NJPW and WAR roster members to deliver his traditional '1,2,3 Daa!' to close the show. It felt like a curtain call for the program with WAR, but moreover, it felt like the end of another chapter in the book of Inoki as a wrestler. After being inactive through most of 1992 and 1993, Inoki would wrestle more often in '94, but on shows promoted as 'The Final Countdown'; a long run of nostalgia matches for Inoki that would culminate in the Tokyo Dome's biggest ever show in 1998.

Masahiro Chono would also start a new chapter in his career in 1994, again prompted by a loss. This time it was to Shinya Hashimoto, who had well and truly arrived in 1993. While the Three Musketeers were embroiled in different programs, or would often wrestle one another, especially in the case of Chono and Muto, they were still loosely a unit, and would come together in six-man tags. In September 1993, Hashimoto declared that the Three Musketeers were no more. Hashimoto showed his new antagonism to his peers when he ended The Great Muta's 13-month long title reign on September 20. When Muta reverted to his babyface Keiji Muto persona, Hashimoto defended against him, and then retained over Kensuke 'Power Warrior' Sasaki as he grew in stature as an intimidating champion.

Chono, usually in colourful tights, was this time in white contrast to Hashimoto's dark gear and mean-spirited visage. The IWGP Champion's offense matched his countenance, and for much of the match's 28 minutes, it felt like a long-form, glorified squash of Chono. The former NWA Champion's occasional strikes or back suplexes would quickly be shut down as Chono clearly played the underdog.

Steve Corino
Hashimoto always knew that many thought of him as the number three guy in the Three Musketeers, but he was OK with that. He always thought Muto was a star in the US, and Chono was Lou Thesz's protege, but he was the true "home grown" star of the three. Some wrestlers get the "monster push" before they win a title, but it was after Hashimoto won the IWGP title that fans looked at him as a killer.

Chono's underdog role was played to good effect, prompting a roar from the crowd as he locked in an STF, and a louder one as he kicked out of the brainbuster that Hashimoto had used to win the IWGP title. Soon after though Hashimoto scored with a leaping DDT. Hashimoto

was bloodied but otherwise dominant, and the white clad babyface had fallen. 1994 would see Masahiro Chono ditch the white and coloured three quarter length tights for black trousers, more facial hair and a meaner attitude that made him Japanese wrestling's first cool heel and a pop culture icon.

Now in its third year, the January 4th Tokyo Dome tradition for New Japan was becoming less of a standalone event driven by interpromotional bouts and more a bookend between two volumes of creative ideas. Plans were set in motion not only for Inoki and Chono this year, but in the junior heavyweight field for the 27-year-old Koji Kanemoto.

Kanemoto was a stablemate of Hiroyoshi Tenzan (*nee* Yamamoto) and Satoshi Kojima, but while his contemporaries would become heavyweights, Kanemoto would stay in the juniors. He was entered in the 1992 Top of the Super Juniors tournament as a highlight of his Young Lion days, before benefitting from the WAR relationship with a handful of bookings, including a loss to Ultimo Dragon. In spring 1993 he made a brief excursion to Mexico, before coming back as Tiger Mask.

Mitsuharu Misawa, having abandoned the Tiger Mask gimmick, was on an ascent to mega stardom by 1994, and held a lot of the credit for All Japan's success in spite of the Megane Super/SWS talent raid in 1990 and '91. AJPW had no plans to give the Tiger Mask character to anyone else, and no longer wanted to license the creation. New Japan considered having Keiichi Yamada trade his Jushin Liger mask for a Tiger one, but with Liger wrestling for WCW at the end of the year, the company went with Kanemoto. For New Japan there was a chance to create another Satoru Sayama like star in Kanemoto, but it didn't work out like any party involved had hoped.

For one, the Tiger Mask character, now long out of print and airing in anime or manga form, didn't resonate with younger fans even opposite Liger. More significantly though, Kanemoto just didn't fit the role. Tiger Mask was a high-flying acrobat, as Sayama and (despite struggles and admitting to not feeling at ease with the character), even Misawa were under the hood. Kanemoto's bout with Liger at Battlefield was an entertaining one, but it was a pair of spectacular entrances involving a 'teleporting' Liger dancing on scaffolding before appearing on the ramp and a stuntman Tiger leaping off a crane for no apparent reason that stuck with the crowd. After a Liger Shooting Star Press, Kanemoto removed his mask, and set up a far more compelling

phase of his career under his real name. ‘The mask didn't fit him,’ Liger would recall. ‘The difference with me was that there were no prior Ligers that I had to draw on. I could wrestle my way and enjoy that. The pressure of the character wasn't good (for Kanemoto).’[29]

Hulk Hogan was a while away from the shift in character that defined his career in the late 1990s, but he did make a significant move away from the WWF in 1993. Hogan had left in the summer, commencing a near nine-year absence from the company that made him a global celebrity. He had been a big star for New Japan before all that though, and when his contract allowed him to take free agent bookings in Japan, he returned to a NJPW ring in May of 1993. In his first match in NJPW since New Japan and WWF split in 1985, he faced the Great Muta while still WWF champion.

Hogan, along with his entourage of Jimmy Hart and Brutus Beefcake, would take a few NJPW bookings while in between the Federation and a WCW debut opposite Ric Flair in July. The last of these was against Tatsumi Fujinami at Battlefield. This was actually the eighth singles match between the two, as they often found themselves in opposing ends of encounters through the first half of the prior decade. Despite a few double countouts however, Hogan was undefeated against Fujinami, and the record between the two would end that way, Hogan winning with an Ax Bomber in a match that lacked the intense, brawling nature of Hogan’s other recent Japanese outings.

More WWF talent that were able to call their own shots in Japan were the Steiner Brothers. Having made the move from WCW to Vince McMahon’s promotion in 1993, the Steiners were still able to honour their NJPW deal. Indeed, as their WWF run was short lived, they would predominantly be NJPW wrestlers through much of 1994 and 1995.

Here they were opposite Hiroshi Hase and Keiji Muto over the IWGP Tag Team Championships in a match that was easily up with Hashimoto vs Chono and Inoki vs Tenryu in terms of excitement and adulation from the Dome crowd. An exercise in innovative offense, the highlight of Scott Steiner debuting the Steiner Screwdriver would be the talk of announcers and video packages for a good while to come for New Japan (the terrifying vertical suplex into a piledriver was not even the finish of the match, owing to Scott following up the devastating move by spending a while standing on the second rope yelling ‘who’s fucking beating us now?’ at the top of his lungs).

Elsewhere on the card, the WAR and NJPW program would see a notable return and some significant debuts. Yoshiaki Fujiwara would work with Tenryu as PWFG scaled back, and his first match back in a New Japan ring would be against Riki Choshu. Choshu represented the New Japan loyalists opposite the man who left the promotion for UWF, though Choshu's own departure to AJPW could easily have led him to represent WAR on this show in some parallel universe. At any rate, it was an intriguing match, with Choshu's more typical pro wrestling leaning against the MMA style of Fujiwara. This was certainly a much more explicitly worked performance than most of Fujiwara's output at the time, but told a compelling story to the crowd that saw Choshu win with a pair of Riki Lariats.

Then there was Heisei Ishingun. Shiro Koshinaka had revived Riki Choshu's Ishingun stable and renamed it after the new emperor back in 1992 and had already been a staple unit of undercard tags for NJPW Dome cards. The Ishingun would hop between NJPW and WAR, including the likes of the Great Kabuki in its number, and donning blue gis, a martial arts approach and an antagonism towards members of both company rosters. On the losing end of Battlefield's opener would be a team that included Yuji Nagata, Manabu Nakanishi and Satoshi Kojima, all three wrestling in the Tokyo Dome for the first of many times.

All Japan Women
AJW Doumu Chou Jo Taisen (Female Dream Battle)- Big Egg Wrestling Universe
November 20 1994
Attendance: 42,500

Bomber Hikari & Chaparita Asari def. Hiromi Sugo & Hiromi Yagi

Great Little Muta & Buta Genjin def. Tomezo Tsunokake

AJW Junior Championship
Candy Okutsu def. Rie Tamada

Suzuka Minami def. KAORU

Mixed Martial Arts Match
Kumiko Maekawa def. Sugar Miyuki

Amateur Wrestling Match
Doris Blind def. Kyoko Hamaguchi

Amateur Wrestling Match
Miyu Yamamoto def. Anna Gomez

Wrestling versus Boxing

Fumiko Ishimoto def. Kaoru Ito

Chigusa Nagayo def. Reggie Bennett

Mikiko Futagami & Shinobu Kandori def. Tomoko Watanabe & Toshio Yamada

UWA Women's Tag Team Championships
Las Cacchoras Orientales (Etsuko Mita & Mima Shimoda) def. Michiko Nagashima & Yasha Kurenai

Bison Kimura & Jaguar Yokota def. Lioness Asuka & Yumi Ogura

Blizzard Yuki def. Mariko Yoshida
VTOP Tournament
Combat Toyoda def. Yumiko Hotta

VTOP Tournament
Akira Hokuto def. Eagle Sawai

VTOP Tournament
Aja Kong def. Manami Toyota

VTOP Tournament
Dynamite Kansai def. Kyoko Inoue

Hikari Fukuoka & Megumi Kudo def. Cutie Suzuki & Takako Inoue

Great Sasuke, SATO & Shiryu def. Gran Naniwa, Jinsei Shinzaki & Super Delfin

VTOP Tournament
Akira Hokuto def. Combat Toyoda

VTOP Tournament
Aja Kong def. Dynamite Kansai

WWF Women's Championship
Bull Nakano def. Alundra Blayze

VTOP Tournament
Akira Hokuto def. Aja Kong

We had, by now, seen wrestling shows at the Tokyo Dome for over five years. A drop in the bucket when it came to New Japan's history, which along with All Japan had turned 22 by the end of 1994, both promotions now outliving the JWA that birthed them. Both companies were fresh faced though when compared to All Japan Women.

AJW was formed in 1968, though by then women's pro wrestling in Japan was no new phenomenon. In fact, its history is close in length

to its male counterpart. Rikidozan and Masahiko Kimura wrestled Ben and Mike Sharpe in Kuramae Sumo Hall in February 1954 in what would be called Japan's first modern pro wrestling match. Just nine months later, Kuramae, again sold out to a crowd of 15,000, saw Japan's first female card. In a charity event kicking off a one-week tour for the *Nihon Joshi Wrestling Kogai* (Japan Women's Wrestling Alliance) Katsumi Tayama and Masako Hashimoto would have the honors of being first in front of the crowd with main foreign draws being Mildred Burke and Mae Young.

Takashi Matsunaga was a prominent figure in JWWA as its representative director and would be regarded as the 'father of *joshi*' (the informal shorthand for women's wrestling in Japan). After a fallout with JWWA management over whether *joshi* should maintain a sport like nature or appeal to the show business aspects of pro wrestling, Matsunaga took much of the JWWA roster and formed All Japan Women. The early years for the promotion were tough; unable to get money through conventional means, Matsunaga would receive funding from Japan's underworld, leading to many early shows in strip clubs.[30]

Yet with a line of credit from Fuji TV, things turned around for AJW, which saw its stars become mainstream celebrities. Jackie Saito and Maki Ueda would form the tag team Beauty Pair, which married pro wrestling with the peculiarly Japanese phenomenon of cross media 'idols'. The pair would have a recording deal with RCA Victor, and even a rather camp movie that served as an origin story of two high school friends scouted after fighting off lecherous boys. As Saito and Ueda grew in popularity, Fuji responded in kind, supplementing their 90-minute Sunday afternoon TV spot with a 30-minute show in Friday prime time.

Beauty Pair were two of a number of cross media stars AJW produced, including Mimi Hagiwara (who was already a television actress before being inspired by Saito and Ueda to start wrestling) and "Devil" Masami Yoshida. The Crush Gals would be AJW's big break after Beauty Pair though, Chigusa Nagayo and Tomoko 'Lioness Asuka' Kitamura, along with Dump Matsumoto and the Jumping Bomb Angels becoming stars of vinyl, screen and even the arcade thanks to a partnership with Sega. Instrumental in managing both the Crush Gals and Beauty Pair was Rossy Ogawa, who got his start as a ringside photographer before becoming a producer and booker for the promotion.

It wasn't just slick marketing that made *joshi* a phenomenon, but a dynamic, high pace style that was radically different to the fare offered by male promotions. 'It was thinking of the ring less as a square but more as a cube, a dice (because of the verticality),' remembered Chigusa Nagayo in 2016. 'It launched the same conversations you had with Will Ospreay and Ricochet much later, standing ovations but people saying it was more like *cirque du soleil*. It took wrestling to a new stage.'[31]

By the early 1990s, the *joshi* scene was a crowded one. AJW was joined by Japan Women's Pro Wrestling in 1986, a promotion inspired by the Cat Club collection of idol starlets formed by Pony Canyon in the mid 1980s, and with a working relationship with NJPW that saw Antonio Inoki make guest appearances at early shows. When younger talent grew unhappy with the company management and left in early 1992, the promotion divided into Legend Ladies Pro Wrestling (LLPW) and JWP. Both were under the same umbrella company of 'JWP Project', but with different approaches, with LLPW working with Genichiro Tenryu's WAR as part of Tenryu's goal to fold *joshi* matches into a male focused promotion.

Chigusa Nagayo, meanwhile, having ridden high on the waves of Crush Gals' popularity in the 1980s, was working on a project of her own. Appealing specifically to female fans who wanted to see women's wrestling project more of an aura of toughness, her GAEA promotion was set to officially launch in early 1995. Then there was Atsushi Onita's FMW, which much like WAR was keen to have women's matches under its umbrella and recruited the likes of Combat Toyoda and Megumi Kudo from AJW.

Competition was fierce, but the wrestling market was unable to support such a crowd. As Japan went further into its long post bubble decline, many *joshi* promotions drastically downsized or faded away entirely, a slow collapse that the male promotions would also face, albeit later. Big Egg Wrestling Universe would be the peak of *joshi* shows, which were never to reach the same heights of the Tokyo Dome again, as most promotions, together with amateur wrestlers and kickboxers, banded together to mark the 40th anniversary of women's wrestling in the country.

Munehiro Hashimoto
***Joshi* was cutting edge in 1994. There was such good talent putting on such physical matches that as soon as a new viewer watched one match, they were hooked. Matches were made to**

keep fans hooked, too; you had the top stars in "dream" featured matches on a much more regular basis than in men's promotions. It was far more innovative.

It was quite the show of strength, a hubristic and indulgent affair on paper that fit 23 matches into a ten-hour time frame. Production included a full brass band kicking off the show and dancers to accompany Las Cacchoras Orientales to the ring. Meanwhile a cast of ninja characters posed as Sakie Hasegawa leapt from a cage suspended above the Tokyo Dome stage, redebuting as Blizzard Yuki. Much like the last character to debut in the Tokyo Dome in Jushin Liger, Hasegawa's character was built as a cross media star with an accompanying manga series. Ultimately Hasegawa's discomfort with the role, and a serious neck injury in 1995 put paid to those plans, but for now, flashy showbusiness muscle was behind her.

Outside of flashy entrances, Wrestling Universe felt like an earnest celebration of women's wrestling and combat sports in Japan. A comedy midget handicap match with the Great Little Muta (otherwise known as veteran mini Little Frankie) and Buta Genjin facing Tomezo Tsunokake was a throwback to midgets being booked as a sideshow accompaniment to female cards in the pre-Fuji TV era. Fumiko Ishimoto and Kumiko Maekawa represented the shoot and kickboxing worlds. Doris Blind and Anna Gomez, a pair of accomplished French amateur wrestlers made guest appearances in ill-advised amateur exhibition matches (held in the normal AJW ring, these bouts lacked the space the participants needed, leading to constant breaks from the referee. Blind's match was more notable to pro wrestling fans as her opponent was Kyoko Hamaguchi, the daughter of IWE legend and trainer of the likes of Tetsuya Naito, Heigo 'Animal' Hamaguchi. Kyoko would go on to win two Olympic bronze medals, but was in tears in the Dome, possibly out of disappointment at a loss, and likely largely due to embarrassment of her dad encouraging her to ham things up for the crowd).

The show was most prominently built around the V TOP Woman tournament. A cross promotional, eight-person single elimination affair, the billed 15 million Yen tournament was teased as Akira Hokuto's last outing in the lead up to the show. Hokuto had entered AJW as a teenager in the mid 1980s and immediately drew in fans as an all-round talent. She appealed as a mat-based wrestler and high flier, though the latter approach filled with planchas and moonsaults, took its toll on her knees. With injuries amassing, Hokuto called a press conference earlier in 1994 to announce a retirement at the end

of the year, before walking back the statement, using the tournament as a platform and saying she would stay if she won.

Hokuto would be given the underdog role in all three of her tournament matches, the more diminutive AJW superstar facing monsters from LLPW and FMW before her home promotion rival. Opposite Eagle Sawai she would eat a variety of strikes before landing a pair of Northern Lights Bombs, the show of strength move her second husband Kensuke Sasaki would also adopt. Against Combat Toyoda meanwhile, Hokuto was ragdolled with suplexes and powerbomb before Toyoda missed a senton through a table. Hokuto would follow up with a Northern Lights Bomb to barely squeeze into the final, the underdog tale perfectly set up.

Manami Toyota was the slighter babyface on the other side of the VTOP bracket but would be stopped in her tracks by AJW's homegrown monster, Aja Kong. Kong had risen to prominence in the late 80s as part of Gokumonto (the Prison Gate Party) with Bull Nakano, becoming a lead heel in the wake of Dump Matsumoto's 1988 retirement.

Kong and Toyota had an incredibly dangerous and incredibly physical match, pushing the envelope of what fans expected from any gender in the mid 1990s. Toyota would withstand a splash through a ringside table, a terrifying gutwrench on the hard entrance ramp, and package piledrivers from Kong. Toyota would respond with her signature frenetic pace and striking execution. Her Japanese Ocean Queen Suplex, delivered with Kong seated on Toyota's shoulders, mirrored the show of strength of Hokuto's Northern Lights Bomb to Eagle Sawai. Kong would kick out however, and land a sitout brainbuster to advance.

Kenny Omega
When I'd lost faith in wrestling it was these types of *joshi* matches that made me feel excitement for the sport again. Why couldn't the men replicate that passion? It wasn't until mid 2016 I think I was able to allow myself to empty my heart and soul into a match like Toyota and Kong did and use that in conjunction with my ability to do what I've been doing.

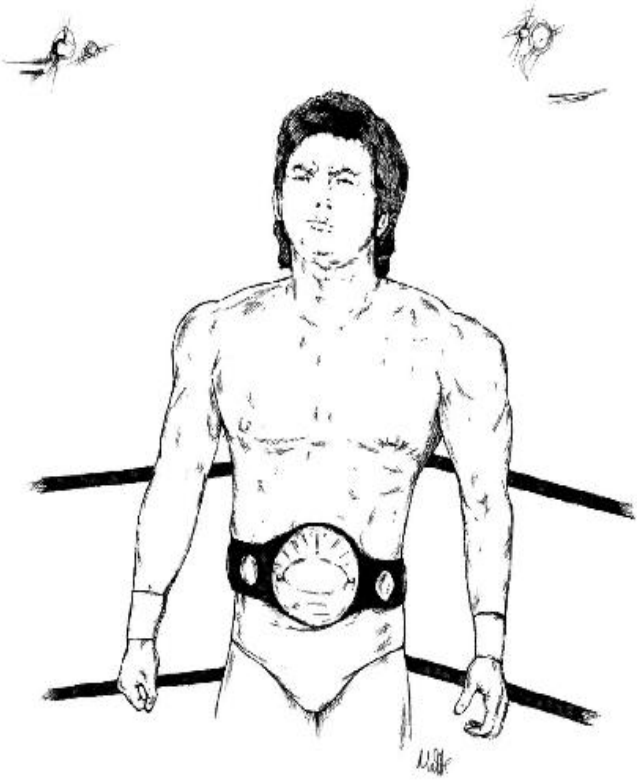
Kong's semifinal match was a very different breed of physicality, a strike-based affair with Dynamite Kansai, who had defected to JWP from AJW in 1991. Brutal head kicks from Kansai was responded to with a pair of spinning back fists.

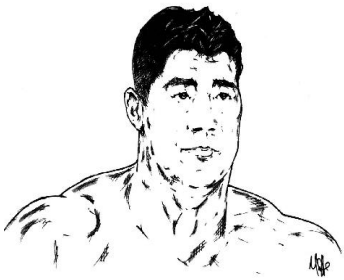
In that regard, the tournament bracket, and particular Kong's arc through the tournament told a complete and satisfying story. With Toyota, there were high risk spots. Kansai provided outright physicality. The final with Hokuto then provided an emotional core. A much slower paced match to those that went before, it was centered around Kong tweaking her knee in the face of a Hokuto plancha. Rejecting doctors' help, Kong went from frightening heel to sympathetic babyface, as Hokuto exploited her opponent's injury out of a desire to win in spite of her ethics. When Hokuto delivered three Northern Lights Bombs to win, she sat in shock, as Kong burst into tears.

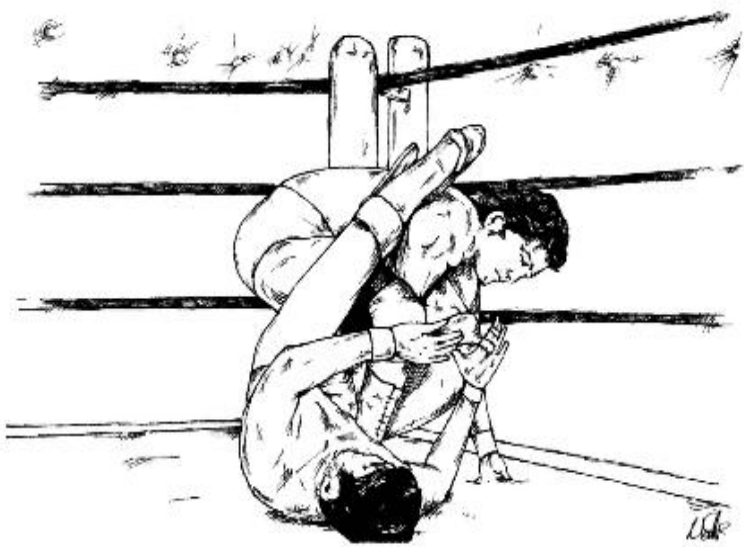
The emotionally resonating nature of the tournament meant that other matches in the second half of the ludicrously long card were overlooked. Alundra Blayze dropped the WWF Women's Championship to Bull Nakano. Nakano was traveling back and forth to the WWF at the time to feud with a Blayze that was reinvigorating female roles within McMahon's promotion. The two had a fine match, prefaced with another extravagant entrance as Blayze appeared in a fleet of Harley Davidson motorcycles, and ending with a top rope leg drop from Nakano. The fans' minds were focused on the tournament final to follow though; burned out by the long show, they reacted with silence.

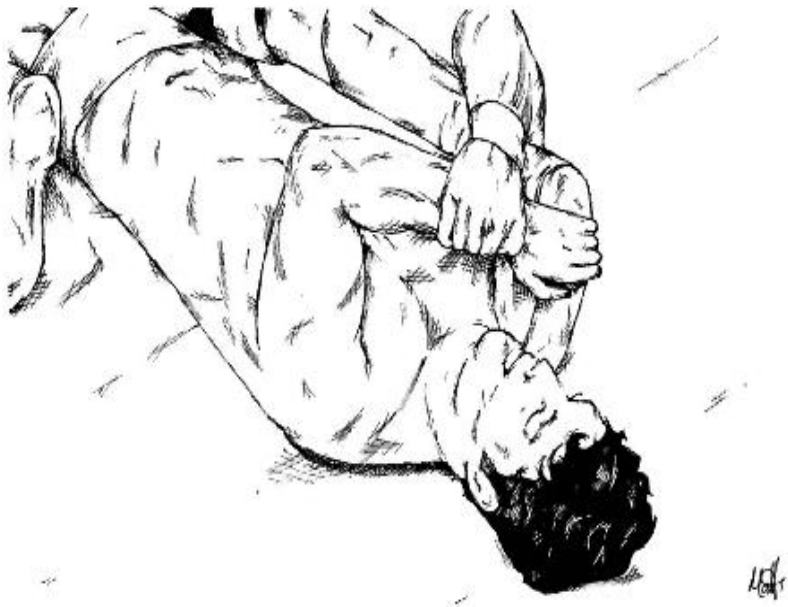
After the tournament final, Nakano handed Hokuto her WWWA World title, saying 'this belongs to you now'. Hokuto refused the belt before officially rescinding her retirement. 'All of you want to see more of me?' She would demand if the crowd. 'Next year, when we're back in this Dome, I'll be here.' There wouldn't be a next time in the Dome for All Japan Women. Yet Big Egg Wrestling Universe was a fitting tribute to 40 years of women's wrestling history in Japan, and an example of just how innovative and vital to the medium at large the work these women did was.

1995









New Japan Pro Wrestling
NJPW Battle 7
January 4, 1995
Attendance: 62,500

UWA World Welterweight Championship
Shinjiro Otani def. El Samurai

IWGP Junior Heavyweight Championship
Norio Honaga def. Great Sasuke

Heisei Ishingun (Akitoshi Saito, Kuniaki Kobayashi & The Great Kabuki) def. JJ Jacks (Akira Nogami & Takayuki Iizuka) & Osamu Kido
Koji Kanemoto def. Yuji Nagata

Hiroyoshi Tenzan def. Manabu Nakanishi

Tiger Jeet Singh & Tiger Jeet Singh Jr. def. Heisei Ishingun (Michiyoshi Ohata & Shiro Koshinaka)

BVD Martial Arts Tournament

Sting def. Tony Palmore

BVD Martial Arts Tournament
Antonio Inoki def. Gerard Gordeau

Riki Choshu & Yoshiaki Yatsu def. Heisei Ishingun (Kengo Kimura & Tatsutoshi Goto)

Masahiro Chono & Sabu def. Junji Hirata & Tatsumi Fujinami

Hawk Warrior (w/Animal Warrior) def. Scott Norton

BVD Martial Arts Tournament
Antonio Inoki def. Sting

IWGP Tag Team Championships
Hiroshi Hase & Keiji Muto def. The Steiner Brothers (Rick & Scott Steiner)

IWGP Heavyweight Championship
Shinya Hashimoto def. Kensuke Sasaki

New Japan rang in 1995 with Battle 7. With strong business, about to reach new heights with a successful angle later in the year, this would be the first year to see multiple New Japan Tokyo Dome shows. Up to this point, however, they had been annual affairs, of which this was lucky number seven.

January 4 was now becoming an institution for New Japan fans, a permanent spot on the calendar for the fourth year. With the yearlong build to Inoki and Tenryu in 1994, the big stadium show took on a form it would retain for the most part decades later. It may have been the first show on the NJPW calendar, but it was a clear bookend to a year of feuds and matches. Like the holiday it immediately followed, this was a chance to look back on the year that was, with an eye to the future to come.

Battle 7, then, reflected on an eventful 1994. To many, the year would be forever remembered as the summit of a golden era for junior heavyweights in New Japan. As Jushin Liger gained more booking control over the division, he was able to convert positive relationships into dream matches. His forward thinking and broad experience saw

him shine a Japanese spotlight on relatively unknown domestic talent like Great Sasuke and Super Delfin, who, along with Ultimo Dragon, were cultivating a breed of Japanese lucha that came from learning in Mexican rings and combining those lessons with the traditional Japanese base.

It was in the summer of 1994 that Liger was able to make good on his dream of a promotion agnostic carnival for wrestling fans that shone the light on wrestlers both domestic and international, contracted and independent alike. The idea had been baked in the mind of a 15-year-old Keiichi Yamada attending the Dream Pro Wrestling All Star card Tokyo Sports had hosted on August 26 1979 to mark its 20th anniversary[32]; 15 years removed from that event, Super J Cup '94 happened in Ryogoku Sumo Hall.

The card would be remembered as one of the best single night tournaments in pro wrestling history, and through VHS tape trading, became an internationally viral and shared event long before the advent of the internet welcomed more western fans to Japanese wrestling product. The junior heavyweight division was capable of drawing a sold-out Sumo Hall house, and took over the first few matches of Battle 7.

Great Sasuke had made his Tokyo Dome debut during the All Japan Women's show the prior November, as part of a 'six-man lucha exhibition' match buffering main events. Here though, he challenged Norio Honaga for the IWGP Junior Heavyweight championship. Honaga had won the title in a hastily arranged tournament in September after Liger fractured his ankle teaming with Riki Choshu against Keiji Muto and Wild Pegasus days prior. Honaga would solidify that win with defences against Pegasus (later more famously known as Chris Benoit) and Black Tiger (the second iteration of Tiger Mask's nemesis famously portrayed by Eddie Guerrero). While Honaga would never have the main event spotlight that those two opponents would receive, he was an effective heel, shutting down high flying opponents. The Sasuke match was no different, the entire match setting the table for a Sasuke dive that got a rise from the crowd before hopes of a new champion were dashed by a quick cradle.

If fans were less receptive to Honaga and Sasuke, it was because of a strong effort from Shinjiro Otani and El Samurai to open the show. Contested over the Universal Wrestling Association's welterweight title (the Mexican promotion would become defunct in 1995, but its belts would stay in Japan, and the UWA Junior Heavyweight title

would become one of eight belts that comprised the J Crown defended through 1996 and 1997), the bout was a thrilling display of the no-nonsense Otani, possessing the air of a strict, hard-nosed master even at the age of 22, trying to suppress the more colourful Japanese lucha proponent Samurai. While later January 4 shows would open with high flying and fast paced junior heavyweight affairs, the long form nature of the match had fans quietly watching at first, but wholly immersed by its end with a dragon suplex delivered by Otani.

Otani, clad in black tights and using suplexes and strikes stood in contrast to the Japanese lucha movement, with its high flying and colourful characters. Koji Kanemoto had shed his own masked character, giving up the Tiger Mask name one year prior. He would go on further excursions to Europe in 1994 before returning at Battle 7. Kanemoto, he declared, wanted to shed every remnant of what had made him Tiger Mask, and had the new goal of becoming a champion, a headliner, and a Mercedes Benz owner by the age of 30. He was a kindred spirit to Otani, then. The two would quickly form a team, but for now, he faced Yuji Nagata. Nagata was groomed for a strong future within the company and was set for a long excursion himself via WCW. In the meantime, his painful kicks and crisp suplexes were a grand foil for Kanemoto, still flying on occasion, but with a style clearly influenced by the UWF martial arts approach. While a dangerous failed top rope maneuver sent Kanemoto crashing onto his neck, missing Nagata, yet still leading directly to an anticlimactic win, the rest of the match was a gripping one.

The Kanemoto/Nagata tale of a young returnee from Europe taking on a contemporary set for bigger things would be mirrored in the heavyweights. Hiroyoshi Yamamoto would finally make his way back to the New Japan roster at Battle 7 after a victory in 1993's Young Lion Cup had seen him take his learning excursion. Most of his year and a half away was spent with Otto Wanz's CWA in Germany, with some time spent in Calgary, where under Tetsunohide 'Tokyo Joe' Daigo he gained weight and a distinctive look. Now as Hiroyoshi Tenzan, he engaged in a 'Gold Rush' match to set up a young challenger for the IWGP Heavyweight title after Battle 7.

His opponent in Manabu Nakanishi was a hugely imposing figure being labelled by announcers as the 'super rookie'. Nakanishi, like Nagata, was all but out of a Young Lion phase, but awaiting a trip abroad with WCW before really storming the top of the card. This was a showcase for Tenzan, who won with a Mountain Bomb, and would go on, at 23 to become the youngest challenger for the IWGP

championship up to that point in time in March.

1994 had been a year of junior heavyweights being highlighted, and new talent being developed. It had also been the year Antonio Inoki's long retirement began. Inoki had a fairly active 1994, with six matches over the course of the year, but two were billed as Final Countdown matches that were part of a retirement tour of former foes and desired opponents. Inoki would beat Keiji Muto in May, before facing judoka Willem Ruska in the early autumn, a rematch 18 years in the making from a period where Inoki was eager to prove his worth against legitimate martial artists before taking on Muhammad Ali.

For Battle 7, a four-man tournament would be sponsored by BVD, the sportswear company having recently come aboard in a lucrative endorsement deal. These were branded martial arts affairs, though its eventual winner was undisputed from the outset, and finalist Sting stood out somewhat in the brackets. The WCW representative would face off against karate veteran Tony Palmore, a student of karate legend Benny Urquidez, in an awkward bout that saw Sting take some painful legitimate kicks before winning with a Scorpion Deathlock. Inoki meanwhile would submit a veteran of the first UFC event in Gerard Gordeau.

This would set up a Sting versus Inoki match, which, still under the label of mixed martial arts, felt decidedly strange to watch. Inoki approached the match in a ground-based MMA mindset, while Sting was in pro wrestler mode, the resulting long leg work from Sting and Inoki's protracted selling feeling rather flat until Inoki cinched in his rear naked choke finish. Inoki was still to wrestle four more times inside the Tokyo Dome en route to the Final Countdown reaching zero in 1998.

1994 had also been the year Masahiro Chono underwent a dramatic change. Always the reliable workhorse of the Three Musketeers who didn't quite reach the superstar status of Muto or Hashimoto, Chono's character would shift in the summer. Following his third G1 Climax win, Chono would declare himself a 'lone wolf' (lightly poking fun at Muto's former science fiction gimmick Space Lone Wolf) with no allegiance to stablemates or to New Japan itself. Chono would ditch his colourful tights for black leather, adopt a forceful Kenka Kick finish, and become Japan's first ever cool heel. He foreshadowed the rise of the nWo and Steve Austin in the west and provided a model for Tetsuya Naito and Los Ingobernables decades later.

Autumn of 1994 saw the Super Grade Tag League (a precursor to the modern World Tag League) take place. Chono was entered in the tournament 'against his will', paired with Super Strong Machine. There followed a run of matches where Chono refused to tag in, would attack his team mate and even rip off his mask. The now unmasked Junji Hirata would team up with Tatsumi Fujinami for the ensuing blow off match.

Chono's partner would be the somewhat peculiar fit of Sabu. Terry Brunk had earned quite a reputation in Japan over 1993 and 1994 for Atsushi Onita's FMW. Almost a frantic reinvention of Tiger Jeet Singh, Sabu had a similar disregard for the fans, sending terrified members of the public running as he stormed to the ring. Within the ropes though, Sabu was a much more active performer than Singh, with spectacular acrobatics and usage of tables and chairs that was as dangerous as it was innovative as it was inaccurate.

Here Chono for the most part let Sabu take center stage, as he flung himself to the outside of the ring, onto the ramp, and onto Hirata laid on a table from a chair perched on the top rope. Chono would score the pinfall on Hirata, and the odd pairing would continue after Battle 7 (including through spring appearances that saw Sabu no show ECW events he was double booked for; he'd be fired in the US and receive an IWGP Junior Heavyweight title run in Japan). As ill-fitting as Chono and Sabu were however, this was a match that spoke to Chono's burgeoning versatility as a performer, and the diversity of the Battle 7 card, which ranged from junior heavyweights, through a powerhouse contest between Scott Norton and Road Warrior Hawk, to a debuting Tiger Jeet Singh Junior accompanying his father to take on Heisei Ishingun in another brawl.

Presiding over Battle 7 though was a Shinya Hashimoto who had dominated New Japan in 1994. After a Tatsumi Fujinami upset, he was away from the IWGP Heavyweight Championship for all of one month before the May Wrestling Dontaku show saw him snatch the title back in just six minutes in the Fukuoka Dome. This set up a year long reign for Hashimoto, defending against Chono, Hiroshi Hase (who was continuing his tag feud with the Steiners teaming with Muto in the semifinal), Choshu, a guest starring Yoshiaki Fujiwara, and one Power Warrior.

Kensuke Sasaki's run as Power Warrior was always due to Road Warrior Animal's absence from cards, and Hawk being without a tag partner. With Animal back in the picture, Sasaki was able to drop a

character and pairing that had helped him considerably, the story of Battle 7's main event being that Power Warrior couldn't get the job done against Hashimoto, but Sasaki may be able to as his true self.

The match had both wrestlers even in terms of power, early feeling out putting both on the same level. When it came to strikes however, Sasaki took over on Hashimoto with stiff blows and the added visual shock of a legitimate Hashimoto broken nose. Sasaki would try several times for the stranglehold he used as a finish, and finally locking it in with Hashimoto's blood streaming from his nose, the crowd steadily bought into the idea a new champion may be crowned.

Hashimoto would find his DDT attempts constantly blocked, eventually seeming desperate with frenetic knees to Sasaki's head to score the move. Sasaki would kick out to a rapturous reception, but would fall to a fisherman's buster mere moments later. Hashimoto would address the crowd saying 'if anybody wants to take this belt, come at me and try'. By the time NJPW returned to the Dome, Hashimoto would be without the belt. Before he could get it back, new challengers from outside had to be faced.

Baseball Magazine Sha
Yume no Kakehashi: Tokyo Dome Haruanman (Bridge of Dreams: Tokyo Dome in Full Bloom)
April 2, 1995
Attendance: 60,000

JWP
Candy Okutsu, Dynamite Kansai, Fusayu Nochi & Hikari Fukuoka def. Cutie Suzuki, Devil Masami, Hiromi Yagi & Mayumi Ozaki
LLPW
MMA Match
Shinobu Kandori def. Harley Saito
AJW
Aja Kong & Kyoko Inoue def. Blizzard Yuki & Manami Toyota
Go Gundan
Alien Deathmatch
Ryuma Go def. Uchu Majin Silver X
IWA Japan
Barbed Wire Board Barbed Wire Bat Bunkhouse Deathmatch
Leatherface, Shinji Nakamaki & Terry Funk def. The Headhunters (Headhunter A & B) & Cactus Jack
Pancrase
Minoru Suzuki def. Christopher DeWeaver
PWFG
Yoshiaki Fujiwara & Yuki Ishikawa def. Carl Greco & Don Arakawa
Michinoku Pro
Gran Naniwa, Super Delfin & TAKA Michinoku def. SATO, Shiryu & The Great Sasuke
RINGS
Akira Maeda def. Chris Dolman
UWFi
Billy Scott, Masahito Kakihara & Nobuhiko Takada def. Gary

Albright, Gene Lydick & Kazuo Yamazaki

FMW

No Ropes Exploding Barbed Wire Deathmatch

Great Nita def. Pogo Daiyo

AJPW

Akira Taue, Johnny Ace & Toshiaki Kawada vs Kenta Kobashi, Stan Hansen & Mitsuharu Misawa: Time limit draw

NJPW

Shinya Hashimoto def. Masahiro Chono

The national economy wasn't quite at the Megane Super peak anymore by 1995. Opticians weren't starting wrestling promotions, after all, with no attempts to book Michael Jackson for office parties. Wrestling, though was doing well. New Japan were running stadium shows across the country, All Japan was beloved by a more hardcore fan, and there was still a breadth and diversity to the medium on a very visible level. So it was that the Baseball Magazine Company was able to combine former Megane Super head Hachiro Tanaka's joint loves of lavish corporate parties and pro wrestling; a one off, extremely ambitious show at the Tokyo Dome.

The company was in its 50th year in 1995, and while, as its name suggested, the publisher got started in baseball, its wrestling publications would become an institution. In 1955, their once periodical Pro Wrestling Special magazine became monthly, and Monthly Pro Wrestling and Boxing would cover the Rikidozan era in Japan.

1972 would be a turbulent year for wrestling all around, and as New and All Japan broke off from the Japan Wrestling Association, wrestling and boxing separated at Baseball Magazine Sha. Monthly Pro Wrestling ran until 1983, when, with a Satoru Sayama as Tiger Mask cover on its first issue, the magazine went weekly. Weekly Pro Wrestling is a Japanese institution that still runs today, outliving competing publications like Gong, which went through a similar path of going from monthly to weekly, before disappearing.

Japanese press tends to be deferential to sources in order to gain access and exclusives. Helping out Weekly Pro Wrestling (affectionately abbreviated to ShuPro) was for the most part viewed by promotions as a mutually beneficial exercise. Wrestlers would be interviewed, photos handed over, and the resulting publicity from ShuPro readers would help to drive ticket sales. The positive ties

between ShuPro and most promotions would lead to the Bridge of Dreams concept: 13 matches from 13 promotions, from Ryuma Go's surreal self-titled promotion up to New and All Japan.

Munehiro Hashimoto
'ShuPro sold in tremendous numbers at the time. It wasn't that they had political muscle per se, but that from a promoter's standpoint, if you turned down the invitation, you were picking an unnecessary fight with the media. Plus, it was a chance to get visibility on a huge stage, while the fans got to see the best of every promotion. So it was kind of win, win, win.'

Yet the show didn't take place without controversy. It was alleged that it was more than simple back and forth of publicity that led to ShuPro's success. Takashi 'Tarzan' Yamamoto would later admit giving FMW exposure in its early years in exchange for cash, including taking 300,000 Yen for a front cover on the magazine. More egregious was a long campaign against Genichiro Tenryu and SWS. As Megane Super started to build momentum for their promotion, they were labeled a 'black ship' in the magazine pages, and Tenryu was vilified as being a mercenary that was willing to do anything if he was bought and paid for. 'New Japan had the funds to prevent Muto from leaving,' Yamamoto would later write[33] 'AJPW didn't have that protection. I decided to side with Baba.'

Yamamoto would meet Baba and Seiji Sakaguchi in a Tokyo hotel with the next week's ShuPro headline, labelling SWS as 'Sell Out Pro Wrestling'. After some general discussion, all three went separate ways. Hours later though, Yamamoto was summoned back to the hotel for tea with Baba. After a curt conversation, the All Japan boss declared 'well, back to work', and made his exit, leaving a brown envelope behind with 500,000 Yen in cash inside.

Giant Baba had paid for the negative Tenryu and 'Sell Out Pro Wrestling' coverage, though it wouldn't be until two decades later that the truth came out. For now, though, Weekly Gong complained that no one publication should hold enough sway over the pro wrestling space to have promotions do their bidding and run a show on such a large scale. Tenryu, for his part, protested Bridge of Dreams with a WAR show running next door at Korakuen Hall at the same time. Tenryu would address the crowd during the show, stating that no amount of money from Baseball Magazine would make him appear for them, and that payoffs were meaningless if the people doing the paying were bad.

Even casting bribes aside, there was a growing unease directed at the magazine from promotions unhappy with Yamamoto's opinion and editorial driven style. New Japan in particular wasn't happy with ShuPro, eventually resulting in a month-long blacklisting of the magazine in early 1996. Yamamoto took the space left by a lack of New Japan coverage mainly to write scathing editorials directed toward Weekly Gong; ShuPro sales crashed and Yamamoto would resign.

For now, though, the Bridge of Dreams was filled with matches that set up a busy few weeks for almost every promotion involved. All this was presided over by a 'New Japan Dream' main event of Shinya Hashimoto against Masahiro Chono. With the rest of the card being seen by many as a big opportunity on a big stage supplied by the publisher, it was a main event that lacked drama, ShuPro diplomatically suggesting that some fans preferred the semi main event, while Hashimoto himself was critical immediately afterward. 'Tonight was a chance to see other promotions. We have to take their best aspects and adapt. I don't think (this match) was something to be too proud of'.[34]

New Japan was leading up to its infamous two-day event in North Korea with WCW, and from there to running the Fukuoka Dome at the end of the month and Hashimoto losing the IWGP title to Keiji Muto. It seemed like ShuPro's show was low on the priority list, and New Japan in the form of Riki Choshu was representing itself next door at Tenryu's WAR show at the same time.

For the rest of the card, 12 promotions displayed a statement of intent, and tried to show what made them stand out. For FMW, on the road to Atsushi Onita's 'retirement match' (one of several, as Onita would be wrestling in deathmatches up to 2017) was Onita's Great Nita alter ego against IWE and Puerto Rico veteran Mister Pogo. Onita was intent on having an 'electrified' barbed wire rope match, where pyrotechnics would envelop anybody touching the barbed wire.

With the ring ropes and pyro taking half an hour each to setup and tear down, having the match in the same ring as everybody else would have made for a bored and tired crowd, not to mention an eight-hour show. Onita consented to setting up a second ring in the baseball stadium's left field. This was so far from the rest of the action, most of the crowd had to watch the big screen; those sitting in left field had a great view of the deathmatch but found themselves behind the screen

and squinting at the center ring for the rest of the show. It wasn't ideal, and one has to wonder why Onita was so intent on having such extravagant gimmickry for one match. His argument that he'd rather play to 10,000 in left field than 60,000 in the center was typical of his and FMW's counter cultural spirit.

The crowd bought into the spectacle of the match, if not a deflating finish where both Nita and Pogo fell into the ropes together and Nita pinned Pogo out of nowhere. From here though, Onita took a long time heading to the back, playing to the crowd; long enough that boos and catcalls began. The boos led to chants of 'Zen Nihon', and the ensuing AJPW six-man tag was met with roars of delight throughout.

The all-star cast of Taue, Kawada, Misawa and Kobashi, in addition to Stan Hansen and Johnny Ace presenting All Japan's biggest foreign stars of the '80s and '90s respectively put on a grand display. All Japan's Champion Carnival had just passed the mid way point, a tournament that would have these two teams fill out the top six spots. There was a promotional purpose to the match then, and a reasoning behind its 30-minute draw so as not to give a hint as to who might have come out on top later in the month. A groan of disappointment at the non-finish though gave way to respectful applause at the effort and physicality from six men in the middle of a demanding tour, and the reaction of the crowd made it seem like All Japan could easily have run more shows at the Dome during their 1990s boom.

If All Japan benefited from changing the pace in following a deathmatch, Pancrase, in Minoru Suzuki, had a tougher affair. In this case, the change was much more radical. Suzuki submitted Australian Chris DeWeaver in a legitimate MMA fight, following IWA Japan's barbed wire board, barbed wire bat deathmatch.

Formed the year prior, IWA was getting traction for the charisma of stars like Shinji Nakamaki, and a wide range of foreign wrestlers, including Terry Funk, who was undergoing a radical transformation into the 'middle aged and crazy' hardcore wrestler that defined him in the mid 1990s. The summer would see the King of the Deathmatch tournament in Kawasaki, an internationally tape traded event that did for hardcore wrestling what 1994's Super J Cup did for junior heavyweights and helped make a name of Mick Foley as Cactus Jack.

In their Dome bout, the concept was that a barbed wire bat was laying in the middle of the ring, and all involved had to run to the ring from the stage in order to make use of it. Due to a miscue, Foley set off

running long before he was supposed to, ShuPro having a disappointed tone in reporting ‘the sight of having a deathmatch wrestling school sports day was ruined by Cactus Jack and his flying start’. There followed an oft times athletic but cringe inducingly painful affair, including Nakamaki being sandwiched between two barbed wire boards and then suffering a Headhunter moonsault. Less spectacular was Foley’s unsuccessful attempt at setting one of the boards on fire, and the finish of the match to a Nakamaki schoolboy from nowhere in particular.

The fans ate the action up, but cooled somewhat during the formalities before the Pancrase match. Suzuki had made the complete transition to MMA from pro wrestling by this point, but still had the mentality of a performer. ‘I was pleasantly surprised by the crowd in the end,’ he'd comment afterward. ‘The referee checks lost them a bit, but they were into the fight. Usually on our shows I'm listening to the crowd build through the night but here it's a main event for every promotion. They're loud all the time so it's hard to find a rhythm. Then there was the matter of the pool of blood right where we went to ground.’

Shinobu Kandori pummeled Harley Saito into a quick submission in LLPW’s MMA match, making a distinct break from the other two *joshi* bouts on the card, high flying spot filled matches from JWP and AJW, the latter drawing Akira Hokuto into the ring for a surprise appearance and a challenge to Aja Kong. What surprised about the show was whether they saw high paced tags from the joshi promotions or from Michinoku Pro, the Deathmatch IWA and FMW action and more traditional work from All and New Japan, the crowd were loud and invested in everything. Even Uchuu Majin Silver X was warmly received and known to the reported 60,000 thanks to his opponent Ryuma Go’s recent mainstream publicity.

Go was a veteran of just about everywhere there was to work in Japan from IWE to both of the big two promotions, including a run as WWF Junior Heavyweight Champion in New Japan. It was his comedic side however that landed attention for his small independent promotion, and semi regular appearances on variety TV. Here he was engaged in an ‘alien death match’, the joke being that with rules such as ‘return from leaving the ring or Earth’s atmosphere before the count of twenty’ ‘no alien death rays’ and ‘no interplanetary interference’, it was, in essence, a normal match.

UWFi had to be philosophically the polar opposite to Ryuma Go’s

Army. The promotion was serving as a vehicle for Nobuhiko Takada, now with the undivided focus he'd had to share in the prior UWF incarnation. The strange nature of a shoot style match in the context of a six-man tag was a backdrop to Takada coming out on top. The 32-year-old was being pushed as pro wrestling's only legitimate champion, and would make open challenges to anybody who could take him on. Soon for Takada this meant a decisive victory to put an end to his feud with Vader, who was taking bookings independent of his WCW deal. Those matches didn't quite bring in enough money to ease his promotions growing financial issues; a partnership with the promotion in the main event would do big business and provide the shape of things to come in pro wrestling worldwide.

New Japan Pro Wrestling/ Union of Wrestling Forces International
NJPW v UWFi ZenMen Sensou (All Out War)
October 10, 1995
Attendance: 67,000

Tokimitsu Ishizawa & Yuji Nagata def. Hiromitsu Kanehara & Kazushi Sakuraba

Shinjiro Otani def. Kenichi Yamamoto

Yoshihiro Takayama def. Takashi Iizuka

Naoki Sano def. Jushin Thunder Liger

Riki Choshu def. Yoji Anjo

Masahito Kakihara def. Kensuke Sasaki

Shinya Hashimoto def. Tatsuo Nakano

IWGP Heavyweight Championship
Keiji Muto def. Nobuhiko Takada

Behind the scenes, it was a moment three years in the making. It started, innocuously enough, with a Masahiro Chono interview in Shukan Gong. When asked if there was anybody outside of New Japan he'd like to face at some point, the answer was Nobuhiko Takada. With Akira Maeda forming RINGS, and Minoru Suzuki and Masakatsu Funaki being in the Fujiwara Gumi camp before starting Pancrase, Takada was left as the ace the new UWFi would be built around.

Most read the piece and shrugged it off as an interesting ‘what if’. Yuto Miyato, who wrestled under the ring name Shigeo, saw a possible opportunity for the recently relaunched and frequently embattled promotion. He showed the article to Lou Thesz, who had just entered the company and brought with him ties to the NWA, which would eventually include their world heavyweight title. Miyato was keen on getting a deal worked out, but he was surprised when Thesz immediately phoned New Japan.

When things came down to the nuts and bolts, however, the match fell apart. NJPW invited a UWFi contingent to their offices one November day in 1992. Sat across a table from one another were three reps from their respective companies. For New Japan, Riki Choshu, Masa Saito and Katsuji Nakajima, who had booked buildings for major shows since 1988. From UWFi was Miyato, Yoji Anjo, who worked in foreign booking, and Ken Suzuki, who had managed to reach a prime spot in the front office after presiding over Takada’s fan club.

Chono and Takada was given the go ahead, but with some pretty weighty conditions. First, a fee to cover Chono’s ‘risks’: a huge 30,000,000Yen (242,000 USD at the time). Second, a freebie to build

up to the Chono match; a six-man tag with Takada and two partners versus three NJPW guys, none of which had to be Chono. Bear in mind, this was for a match to happen in a New Japan ring. The tag match would be an elimination affair, with the survivors having a chance at then NWA champion Chono. Takada would then get the Chono match on January 4 1993 (the Fantastic Story card that would actually be built around NJPW and WAR instead, and where Chono wrestled Great Muta). UWFi weren't asking to promote Chono on their own terms, but still had to deal with some harsh financial and creative demands. Choshu led the Takada camp to a specially prepared meeting room. 'We'll give you thirty minutes,' he said, 'think it over.'

There wasn't much thinking to be done. 'They were just trying to think of the most ridiculous way possible to turn us down,' Anjo would complain[35]. UWFi walked, and Anjo, together with Miyato made plans to bring in Vader from America to face Takada instead, with a series of matches lasting into 1995, all booked out of spite toward NJPW. The company booked a hundred million Yen tournament, flashing the stack of prize cash at press conferences as if to make a passive aggressive statement. '*We could pay you that 30 million,'* was what a furious Choshu would read into things. '*We just don't want to'.* There was even the gall to publicly invite Shinya Hashimoto to participate, suggesting he could earn that Chono booking fee for New Japan and more besides, and prove his worth against the 'legitimate martial artists' at UWFi.

Yet through this passive aggression, there was increasing warmth in New Japan (excluding the incensed Choshu) to involving Takada and company. U-Inter, as its fans called it, was not in strong form financially, but had fans buzzing with a similar fervor to its prior incarnations. In July 1995, Kazuo Yamazaki, a veteran of all three UWFs left the promotion to join NJPW as a referee in ring and official out of it. As Yamazaki went one way, 70 million Yen went the other. There followed a much more reasonable discussion, and though Inoki and Choshu were skeptical, Seiji Sakaguchi and Yamazaki were there to convince. Without the WAR cross promotion to prop them up, the younger clutch of post Choshu, Fujinami, Inoki talent needed to be bolstered. Stars had to be made of a Yuji Nagata or Shinjiro Otani, and for those on the main event level, the Hashimotos, Mutos and Chonos of the promotion needed legitimizing. 'The structure, the philosophy (of U-Inter) meant we had very strict rule set, a very legitimate approach and that naturally led to the younger talent looking better and coming through' Suzuki would recall[36].

After some terse phone calls between the two camps, most aggressively in the case of Choshu and Takada with the events of the last couple of years fresh in the mind, things were settled. September 13, 1995 saw UWFi versus New Japan for the first time, a tag match in Yokohama Arena that saw Tatsuo Nakano and Yoji Anjo defeat Yuji Nagata and Riki Choshu. If any doubt lingered in Choshu's mind about how to make the program work, the crowd reaction to the match helped allay it. Nagata and Anjo gave each other black eyes with kicks and mounted punches, and Choshu quickly put plans together to face Anjo, in whom he saw a top-flight heel.

October 9 would be the date for the big interpromotional clash. A nine-match card was proposed, with eight singles bouts and a tag team opener. It would be a condensed card too, and timed to be the shortest wrestling show in Dome history up to this point; starting at 6:30 PM on a Monday night nowhere near a holiday, it seemed like the show was starting on the back foot.

This didn't stop the configuration of the building legitimately selling out. Lines for the same day ticket sales started the night before, and ultimately fans were turned away at the door; news crews would interview fans peering at the live feed on a tiny monitor from outside the building in days before streaming services and unedited live broadcasts.

Takada's opponent for the night would now be Muto, a battle of the two champions after Takada's long held hype of being the best champion in the field. Only the IWGP title would be up for grabs however, plans shifting from the original idea of a double title match. Lou Thesz was wary of how Choshu would treat the top U-Inter title under his book and refused for it to be defended on a New Japan show.

Another individual who had cooled somewhat on the cross promotion was Miyato. Initially put opposite Chono, Miyato didn't see the arrangement working out, that November 1992 meeting still lingering in the memory. Miyato left UWFi altogether, and Chono, playing to his heel character, refused to take another opponent to fight for his company's honour.

So it was that an eight match show was held in front of a crowd far more partisan and fervent than either promotion could have hoped for. Antonio Inoki stepped in the ring and declared the show 'a new page being opened in the history of pro wrestling and martial arts.' It's

rare for a pro wrestler's hyperbole to be accurate.

It was an undercard that, as Suzuki wanted, put a strong emphasis on youth. Highlighted in the build was the 28-year-old Anjo, who had an infamously stiff affair with Choshu. The New Japan booker's boots and forearms made brutal contact with Anjo's head, leading to a notorious post-match interview. 'Were you mad today, Mr. Choshu?' came the question. 'Not mad. Not mad at all,' replied the quietly steaming Choshu, a line delivered deadpan enough to remain in fans' minds for more than 20 years and become a TV catchphrase for the parodying comedian Koriki Choshu.

Whether or not the match succeeded in making a major player of Anjo is up to some debate, with Choshu fairly dominating the match and winning emphatically with a Riki Lariat and a Scorpion Deathlock. 'It was a growing experience,' Anjo would later reflect[37]. 'When you're in your 20s things are less about money and more about philosophy, doing the kind of wrestling you want to do. Choshu absolutely wasn't the kind of wrestler I wanted to face, I was just put with him, but being with him made me realize some things are better for business and everyone financially. (Choshu) made me become an adult'. Anjo would be criticized for not living up to the role by some, most notably in ShuPro magazine, Tarzan Yamamoto's comments that Anjo appeared out of shape being a turning point in the souring relationship between the publication and New Japan.

Tokimitsu Ishizawa and Yuji Nagata benefitted hugely by being in the show's opening tag match, a bout with no participants over 26. On the UWF side, exciting junior heavyweight Kazushi Sakuraba and future 'last ace of RINGS' Hiromitsu Kanemaru caught the eye, but the broadly pro New Japan crowd were immensely vocal for their side, and especially an Ishizawa yet to make his post Young Lion excursion and return as Kendo Kashin. The crowd was rapturous for the then diminutive Ishizawa, who scored the win with a triangle on Sakuraba.

As New Japan loyal as the bulk of the crowd was, it was also knowledgeable toward UWFi, and the very different feel that product presented. From the outset they roared with approval at the blend of typical action and MMA, a balance Naoki Sano and Liger would strike successfully in their first match together in five years later on in the evening.

As is often the case with interpromotional cards, New Japan and U-Inter traded wins throughout the night. Masahito Kakihara defeated

Kensuke Sasaki in what was billed as the 'battle of future aces'. A 28-year-old Yoshihiro Takayama, barely three years into his career submitted Takayuki Iizuka, and while the match was less than spectacular, it drew a lot of eyes to the imposing youngster whose story was far from over.

Yet the end of the show would be what people would remember, and Choshu would make sure that the night belonged to New Japan. Shinya Hashimoto against the Karl Gotch trained Tatsuo Nakano was a vehicle for the recently deposed IWGP Heavyweight champion, as he sent Nakano tumbling out of the ring with his signature spinning wheel kick before landing a huge implant DDT to win for his company.

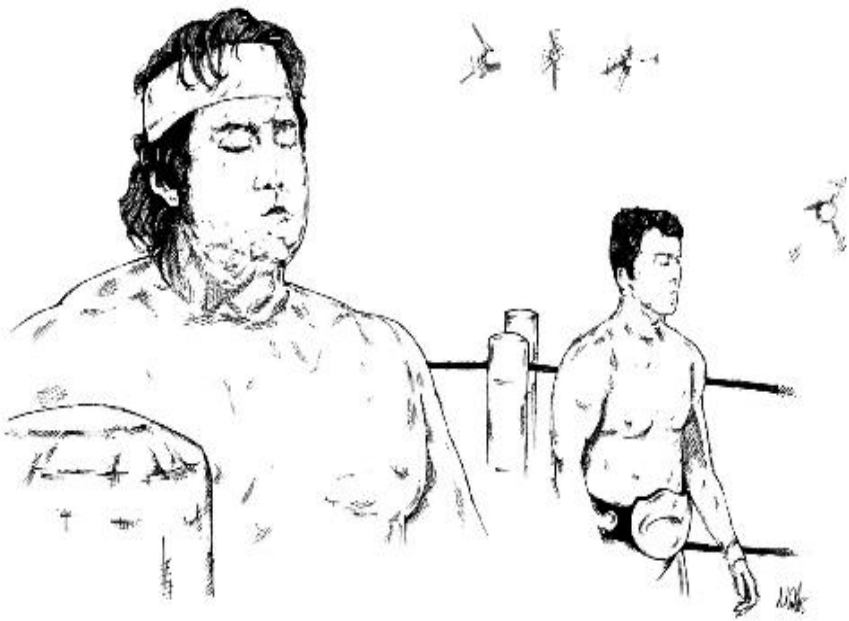
If the NJPW faithful were happy at the semifinal, they erupted for the main event. Muto and Takada told a simple story of flash versus pure ability, Muto failing to score a moonsault and being overwhelmed with Takada's kicks. When Muto got the win however, with a submission to a figure four leglock no less, the roar of the crowd was perhaps the largest in Tokyo Dome wrestling history up to this point.

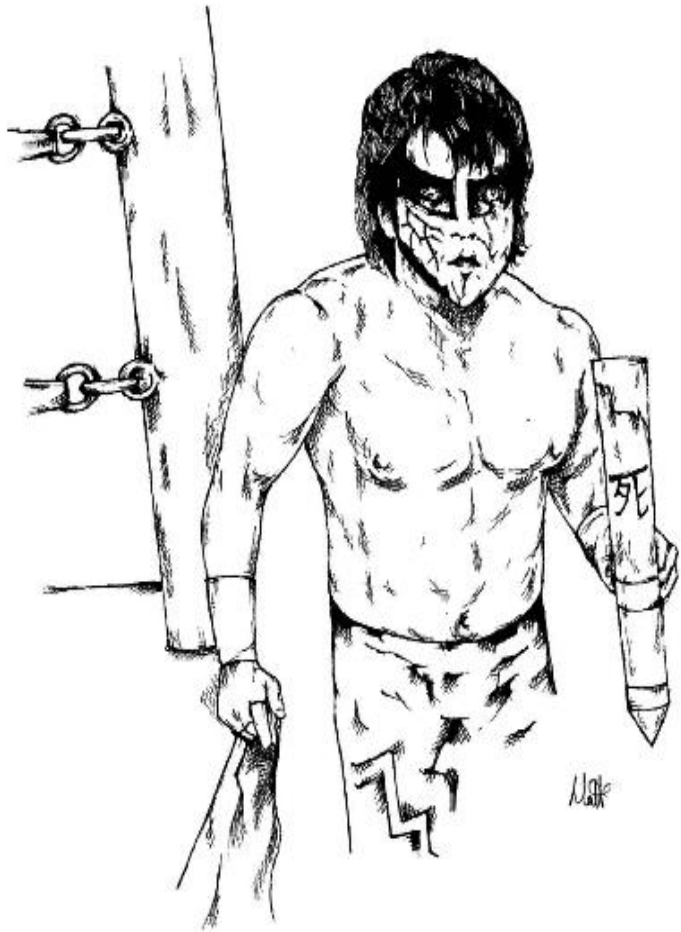
Soichi Shibata
Takada and Muto is without doubt my favourite Dome match, my favourite Dome moment. Inoki's retirement ceremony was up there, but this was the biggest deal for me.

For me personally it was a cool moment because they had me sitting with Inoki for the broadcast. Inoki, obviously, is a bit of an egotist, and during this match I could really sense a jealousy and anger in him, that the crowd was so caught up in something he wasn't involved in. But then Muto's got an ego on him, too! You can't not have an ego in the wrestling business.

A legitimate sell out of the Tokyo Dome on a weeknight was validation of the cross-promotion idea. A massive success like All Out War was always going to ensure a follow up. The war had just begun.

1996





New Japan Pro Wrestling
NJPW Wrestling World In Tokyo Dome
January 4 1996
Attendance: 64,000

Shinjiro Otani, Tokimitsu Ishizawa & Yuji Nagata def.
Hiromitsu Kanehara, Kazushi Sakuraba & Kenichi Yamamoto

Hiroyoshi Tenzan def. Satoshi Kojima

IWGP Junior Heavyweight Championship
Jushin Thunder Liger def. Koji Kanemoto

Shiro Koshinaka def. Masahiro Chono

Hiromichi Fuyuki def. Yoji Anjo

Kensuke Sasaki def. Hiroshi Hase

Antonio Inoki def. Big Van Vader

Riki Choshu def. Masahito Kakihara

Shinya Hashimoto def. Kazuo Yamazaki

IWGP Heavyweight Championship
Nobuhiko Takada def. Keiji Muto

So, the UWFi and New Japan feud continued into 1996. There would be back and forth of NJPW and UWFi talent for the remainder of 1995, with good results for U-Inter guys on home turf (Yoji Anjo would get his win back on Riki Choshu teaming with Masahiro Kakihara and beat Masahiro Chono in a full Yoyogi National Gymnasium), and defeat playing away (Anjo would fall to Kensuke Sasaki in December). While the fans were still hot for the idea of an interpromotional war, Choshu and New Japan booking was doing just enough to make sure the feud had reason to continue while still ensuring the home stars got the spotlight.

Meanwhile Tatsumi Fujinami was given blessing to promote NJPW talent in spinoff promotion Muga. The somewhat artistically titled group (the name translates as “selfless”) was a throwback to traditional, no frills wrestling that followed the rule driven structure and martial arts feel of U-Inter. While Muga was never given the attention of its parent company or inspiration, it was an indication that if the MMA approach continued to be successful, NJPW wanted to bring the style in house rather than work with UWFi.

The result was a show in Wrestling World that continued a hot program, but one that showed signs of slowing down. Within the year, U-Inter would be facing off with WAR instead of New Japan, and Yoji Anjo would start that trend opposite Hiromichi Fuyuki from Tenryu’s

promotion. Though it wasn't how Anjo had initially envisaged his career, he had transitioned from the serious opponent of Rickson Gracie to a character heel, declaring that under his guidance he'd ‘carry the wrestling world on his shoulders’, and taking a can of deodorant with him to the ring, asking the referee to give Fuyuki a spray before the match started. Anjo was fairly dominated by Fuyuki, in a match notable for being the Tokyo Dome debut of veteran tag team and future New Japan bookers Jado and Gedo, using duct tape to shut Anjo’s sizable mouth for him after he spilled to the outside.

U-Inter would suffer losses in three other interpromotional matches on the card. Yuji Nagata and Tokimitsu Ishizawa were again elevated over UWFi’s younger talent, Riki Choshu beat the 23-year-old Masahito Kakihara with a Riki Lariat and Scorpion Deathlock, and Shinya Hashimoto quickly pinned Kazuo Yamazaki with a DDT.

Yet the lasting image at the end of the show was of U-Inter standing tall and NJPW in disarray. Nobuhiko Takada and Keiji Muto had a fine sequel to their October match. Muto was intent on beating Takada by submission twice in a row, squandering a pinfall opportunity with a moonsault by transitioning into a kimura, and failing to submit Takada with the figure 4 he had used in the autumn. Ultimately Takada caught Muto in a cross armbreaker and captured the IWGP heavyweight championship. Shiro Koshinaka and Kensuke Sasaki would both line up in front of Takada, but the new champion would call out Hashimoto. Hashimoto would reply that ‘if I’m challenging, you'll only ever have one defense.’ It turned out to be a prophetic statement as the U-Inter program fizzled, but the idea of an outsider capturing New Japan’s biggest prize captured the imagination of the Tokyo Dome attendees (including one Eric Bischoff of WCW, who would adapt the idea for the nWo in the US months later).

Elsewhere, Wrestling World was a story of two returns and two exits. Jushin Thunder Liger’s 1995 story involved a slow return from the injury that put him out of the January 4 show one year earlier. The year had seen the Super J Cup return, though this time with WAR as its host, with the concept being that different promotions would play host each time the cup was held. Liger would end up the victor of a tournament that also saw the Japanese debut of Rey Misterio Junior, leading up to his first title challenge since returning.

This led to a rematch of the slightly awkward Liger versus Tiger Mask 3 bout from two years prior. Kanemoto was visibly more comfortable in his no-nonsense role, and the pair told a tale of two athletes that

knew each other all too well. Both kicked out of signature offense, with Liger resisting moonsaults and hitting three Liger bombs, before a corkscrew Stardust Press earned him his seventh title.

Kota Ibushi
When I was watching as a fan, Liger's Dome performances were the ones that stayed with me, and this Kanemoto match in particular. Looking back at the finish, I think Liger invented that Stardust Press by accident; it looked like he was trying to do a Phoenix Splash and rotated wrongly. Sometimes new moves come up that way.

Satoshi Kojima was returning not from injury, but European excursion. He had followed Hiroyoshi Tenzan to Germany after winning the 1994 Young Lions Cup, leading to an appropriate return match. Kojima and Tenzan would be tied together as rivals and partners for over two decades to come, and this bout set the table for some stiff future encounters. The nervous Kojima, who had gotten changed and was training in the ring three hours before show time, played a subtle heel in stealing Tenzan's already signature Mongolian Chops and moonsault, but would fall to a Mountain Bomb.

As Kojima and Liger re-entered the Tokyo Dome in 1996, Hiroshi Hase was, for now, leaving it. His bout with Kensuke Sasaki was billed as the 'Northern Light Final'; Hase retiring at just 34. Hase had tagged with various partners in the early part of 1995, including Sasaki and Junji Hirata opposite combinations of Masahiro Chono's Wolves faction. In May, he took time away. A lot of speculation surrounded Hase's sabbatical; a big factor was the death of an NJPW trainee, Hiromitsu Gompei, at the dojo. Hase had scouted the 22-year-old, and his sustaining of a head injury that led to his death four days later in hospital affected him deeply[38].

It was while Hase was taking this time away that he met the chief secretary of Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic political party, Yoshihiro Mori. He'd be convinced to enter politics, running in a summer 1995 general election as an independent, and winning the rural Ishikawa prefecture seat. He'd join the LDP months later, and with a political career on the upswing, decided to put wrestling on the back burner.

His last match, for now at least, with Sasaki was brief and in front of a largely quiet crowd, who perhaps felt that Hase would be back, or that his career left much still undone. The audience came alive for Hase's

Giant Swing, and a Northern Lights Suplex, but Sasaki would win with a Northern Lights Bomb. Afterward, Sasaki would tell his friend to 'go and do what you have to do, I'll be here waiting'. Indeed, Hase would be back to team up with Sasaki mere months later, and would mix his political and in ring careers, though mainly in All, rather than New Japan.

Antonio Inoki was another person saying goodbye, albeit in rather longer form. His Final Countdown tour continued against Vader. Inoki had his own political career, mainly operating on the platform of using sports, and wrestling in particular to cross cultural boundaries and promote peace. It was in this spirit that the Pyongyang Sports and Peace Festival happened in spring of 1995. The two biggest attended wrestling shows of all time saw crowds comfortably in their six figures, though whether every attendee had the choice of showing up or not was up for some debate. The shows cross promoted with WCW and featuring Inoki versus Ric Flair main events were the highlight of 1995 for Inoki.

Heading into 1996 though, Inoki sought to get a win back from the man that beat him as the spark for the infamous Ryogoku riot of 1987. The surprise of the match was not necessarily how physical both were, but the nature of the match. It evoked a wild Vader and Stan Hansen brawl more than an Inoki versus Andre the Giant like show of Inoki's technical ability over a larger foe. Vader would land a huge German Suplex on Inoki before the match spilled to the outside, where Inoki smashed his opponent over the head with a chair. Vader, bloody, would destroy the announce area outside the ring, and gradually destroy Inoki within it, each time Inoki kicking out with less and less authority. When Inoki did finally win with a choke, things fell in line with other Final Countdown matches so far, in theme if not match style. Inoki was getting by in these matches by the skin of his teeth, and with less margin for error as the countdown continued. As it happened, it would span only three more matches in the Tokyo Dome, but over the course of more than two years.

Less long lived was the NJPW versus UWFi rivalry, which had one big show left in it.

New Japan Pro Wrestling
NJPW Battle Formation in Tokyo Dome
April 29, 1996
Attendance: 65,000

Tokimitsu Ishizawa & Yuji Nagata def. Koji Kanemoto & Shinjiro Otani

Osamu Nishimura, Riki Choshu, Satoshi Kojima & Takashi Iizuka def. Heisei Ishingun (Akira Nogami, Kuniaki Kobayashi, Shiro Koshinaka & Tatsutoshi Goto)

IWGP Junior Heavyweight Championship
Great Sasuke def. Jushin Thunder Liger

Randy Savage def. Hiroyoshi Tenzan

Masahiro Chono def. Lex Luger

Power Warrior, Hawk Warrior & Animal Warrior def. Scott Norton, Rick Steiner & Scott Steiner

Great Muta def. Jinsei Shinzaki

Genichiro Tenryu def. Tatsumi Fujinami

IWGP Heavyweight Championship
Shinya Hashimoto def. Nobuhiko Takada

UWFi thought the invasion was grinding to a halt going into 1996, but, for Ken Suzuki, confirmation came after January 4. Suzuki saw Nobuhiko Takada's treatment after winning the IWGP Heavyweight title as a sign that New Japan were all but abandoning ship. 'He had the belt, and it should have been Muto, Hashimoto, Chono, on and on. His next singles match (on a UWF card)? Old man Koshinaka. How do you go from Muto to Koshinaka?'[39]

Shiro Koshinaka was a fine performer, and the March UWFi card would fill Nippon Budokan, but Suzuki, and perhaps Takada as well, saw it as a step down. Koshinaka, after all was primarily ensconced in multi man tag matches as part of Heisei Ishingun in New Japan, and the Budokan main event felt like a continued fobbing off of the program onto WAR, where Koshinaka was also active.

New Japan was, of course, holding the big draws back for their own shows, especially when Battle Formation would make for three Tokyo Dome shows in a six-month span for the promotion. Takada had beaten the flashy Muto, but against a Hashimoto who exuded an aura of legitimate toughness, it felt like a true clash of wills as opposed to a clash of styles. 'Hashimoto won,' said SuzukI, 'and then the payoff turned out to be half the number we discussed. That was how they were doing things.'

That would be that, but the Tokyo Dome crowd still warmly received the Hashimoto match. Takada would send Hashimoto staggering with kicks before trying to submit him. The fans roared as Hashimoto fired back with overhand chops, and when Hashimoto went low with a

trademark sweep as Takada looked high at the challenger's head, the reaction was huge. Hashimoto eventually landed his DDT and then submitted Takada. He closed the show with Inoki's signature '1,2,3, Daa!' call, which seemed an appropriate end to the U-Inter program; NJPW was still the King of Sports, and Hashimoto was its standard bearer once more.

Under Takada and Hashimoto was a bloodbath billed as an 'American Dream Match' despite featuring two Japanese stars. Kensuke Shinzaki had studied under junior heavyweight pioneer Gran Hamada before becoming a founding member of Michinoku Pro Wrestling with the Great Sasuke, and transforming into Jinsei Shinzaki, a Buddhist pilgrim styled character. Scouted by WWF, he had spent just over a year in America and was now returning, with a one-time stop off in New Japan.

In the States, Shinzaki had wrestled as Hakushi, but while he reverted to his prior name back home, he kept the accoutrements of the Hakushi character. This included painstakingly painted kanji over his face and body, consisting of the protective Buddhist Heart Sutra in reference to the folk legend of Hoichi the Earless. Hoichi was a poor blind man, but a skilled lute player, who would be possessed and tormented by ghostly spirits. The story ends with Hoichi being rendered invisible except for his ears, which a samurai rips from his head, freeing him from his curse. In retrospect, it was all a bit too literary for a 1995 WWF audience.

Nevertheless, Shinzaki had an undeniably eye-catching look, and an innovative style walking the line between junior and heavyweight. The supernatural nature of his character and his in-ring approach made him an ideal opponent for Muta, the "American" nature of the match coming from Shinzaki and Muta being arguably the most successful Japanese in WWF and WCW respectively to that point.

Jinsei Shinzaki
I'd only been wrestling for a year and a couple of months or so when I was called (by WWF). At that point in my career it was really a case of them choosing me because they liked the look and the character more than what I could do. But I took it as a great chance. In Michinoku Pro we would wrestle in front of a few hundred people, but there I had to learn how to project to large crowds that might be sitting a long way from the ring.

Before I left, I said that I would only come back to Japan when I

could get a singles match with Muto. I was expecting that to be a few years down the line, but in actual fact I was only over in WWF for a little more than a year when Nagashima gave me the call to set the match up.

It was perhaps surprising to many fans that Muta and Shinzaki had a dramatic, but broadly one-sided match. Shinzaki offered brief flurries firing up at Muta, but was roundly beaten with some dramatic looking offense, including a terrifying spill for Shinzaki from the apron over guardrails to the ringside announcers, followed by a piledriver through those tables. Shinzaki would be cut open, enough for Muta to take his opponent's *kongo zue* walking stick and draw the kanji for 'death' using Shinzaki's blood on his fingertips.

Jinsei Shinzaki
My first match back in Japan being in the Tokyo Dome actually helped me as far as nerves went. I don't have issues with big buildings, it's usually small places where the audience watches you that much more closely that make me nervous. More than nerves, I felt I wanted to show (Muta) that I'd been in WWF for a year and a half, that I'd gotten this experience and that I could prove myself.

The thing is though, as soon as the match finished I felt like I wasn't on a good enough level to have been in the ring with Muta at the Tokyo Dome. Everything that sticks with you in that match is a testament to how good he is, not me.

It seemed like it was death indeed for Shinzaki in New Japan, who apart from another one-off match next January 4, wouldn't appear again until a semi-regular spot in 2001. Shinzaki would take on most of the day to day running of Michinoku Pro, which was still successful at this point, and still a popular promotion for New Japan to work with. Much of that cooperation came from a friendship between Great Sasuke and Jushin Liger, and Liger would deeply praise Michinoku Pro for their help while he booked the junior heavyweight division. 'They have a lot of young talent,' he'd comment in 1995, 'and they're just very selfless. If you watch their shows you see it in their matches, that these guys are doing their best to help the whole company. I'd call them from the office to arrange for them to come in and they were helpful and eager every time. I got injured; they could easily get injured on one of our shows, but they come in every time. They're my favourite company to work with.'[40]

That collaboration would also see Liger and Sasuke add to a growing rivalry at Battle Formation. Starting quickly with a dive from Sasuke to Liger on the floor, the two moved through Liger trying to neutralise Sasuke's leg before the Michinoku Pro challenger delivered a powerbomb and tiger suplex. The impressive match would see Sasuke seize the IWGP junior heavyweight championship, and with seven junior heavyweight titles from around the world already in his possession, form the J Crown. This huge collection of titles would be defended for the coming year or so, with there being a total of five champions, until being dissolved with Shinjiro Otani as their owner in the autumn of 1997.

Cooperation was a leitmotif for the show. If you count Heisei Ishingun's standard mid card appearance in the category, every match except the opener was a cross-promotional affair. The WAR relationship, soon to complete the transition of the U-Inter feud onto their cards, saw Genichiro Tenryu face Tatsumi Fujinami. The last of the big Tokyo Dome dream matches for Tenryu against 80s stars, this was a short and intensely violent affair. After a hesitant start ('There was this distance at first,' Fujinami would remember. 'When you wrestle someone from another promotion, you're both colleagues in wrestling, sure, but it starts to feel like a different martial art. You wonder what the other guy's going to do, don't want to show your hand right away. It was really tense.'[41]) An errant Tenryu kick broke Fujinami's nose, and from there closed fist punches on both parties bloodied. Fujinami would sink in his Dragon Sleeper, but would follow up with a knee drop that missed; two lariats later and Tenryu would complete his sweep of Dome wins against Inoki, Choshu and Fujinami.

The other cross company relationship still maintained in NJPW was with WCW. This manifested itself in Kensuke Sasaki reprising the Power Warrior role to make a Road Warriors trio in a lumpy affair with the Steiners and Scott Norton, and a pair of rematches from the prior December's Starrcade. Starrcade '95 had been billed as the World Cup of wrestling (its competitors hailing from a massive three continents, though only Alex Wright represented Europe), and saw Lex Luger defeat Masahiro Chono and Randy Savage beat Hiroyoshi Tenzan. Chono would reverse the December result in the Dome. With Tenzan's stock still set to rise in NJPW though, he'd lose again to Savage albeit after kicking out of one elbow drop and withstanding three more before falling to an inside cradle.

This was still the neon infused, bright and colorful WCW that owed a

lot to the 1980s WWF stars that topped its cards. When the promotion returned to Japan, they'd be inspired by Takada and Chono both, with a hot commodity in the New World Order.

Jd' Star
MYCAL Yoshimoto Dai Hakurankai
December 25, 26, 1996
Attendance 3000, 5800

(December 25)
Aja Kong, Chaparita ASARI & Rie Tamada def. Jaguar Yokota, Chikako Shiratori & Yuki Ri

(December 26)
Jaguar Yokota def. Bloody Phoenix

Cooga, Cynthia Moreno & Lioness Asuka def. Kumiko Maekawa, Yoshiko Tamura & Yumiko Hotta

JD' Star is not a name that resonates in *joshi* wrestling history. Nor does it have a big place in Tokyo Dome history; this was, after all, not

a dedicated card, but a few matches acting as a side attraction to a larger festival. JD' Star would hold the unenviable, if understandable given the nature of the event, distinction of having the smallest pro wrestling Dome attendance for more than two decades, even then only surpassed by an empty arena match.

Yet while the company could easily be dismissed as a footnote, it wasn't for a lack of effort; or financial capital at least. It was the collective brainchild of Yoshimoto Entertainment, a production and talent management company. They had designs on expanding into China but needed to expand their portfolio and visibility in Japan before doing so. The company looked at the success of wrestling over the prior couple of years, and anticipated profits and attendances would continue to ascend. A women's wrestling promotion, the thinking went, was the answer. Just like during the *joshi* boom, Yoshimoto could create in ring starlets that would be equally marketable as actresses and pop stars; cross media darlings that could penetrate the rest of Asia as well as Japan.

Trying to project the image of proud fighting women with a pop culture edge, the JD' Star name sprang from Joan of Arc; the Japanese pronunciation of her name retaining the French **J**eanne **D'**(Arc). Recent free agents leaving All Japan Women, Jaguar Yokota and Bison Kimura joined a Chikako Shiratori who had 'retired' at 21 from a back injury and was now returning as a young ace for the promotion. With Yokota handling day to day running of the company, it soon attracted prior *joshi* favorites like Lioness Asuka.

Notable names were attached to the front office as well. Yoshimoto's entertainment contacts led to production assistance from the (still pervasive today) TeleTECH, and even potential merchandising with toy and games giant Banpresto.

Yet Yoshimoto had misread the market. 1996 was huge for wrestling in Japan, but this was a wave that was cresting, and in the case of the *joshi* genre, already collapsing rapidly. Beyond the veteran talent the promotion had launched with, it was difficult for new talent to come through when playing to scattered crowds in their three figures. Yoshimoto's drive for new cross media stars involved dubbing their athletes 'athtresses' (these were athletes *and* they were actresses!) but press and media largely derided the talent the drive produced, and at any rate, the portmanteau was all the more awkward in Japanese. JD' would keep going in some form under different owners for around a decade, before finally disappearing in 2006.

For the first two years of the promotion's life, however, JD' Star ran across the whole country in usually small buildings that were still enthusiastic to see former AJW talent. The biggest crowd the promotion would ever draw was on the second night of this Christmas festival staged by Yoshimoto as an exhibition of the various talents they had under their umbrella. Apparently neither televised nor taped, the matches, like the promotion, are lost to the winds of time.

1997

New Japan Pro Wrestling
NJPW Wrestling World '97
January 4 1997
Attendance 62,500

Junji Hirata, Manabu Nakanishi, Osamu Nishimura & Satoshi Kojima def. Kazuo Yamazaki, Osamu Kido, Takashi Iizuka & Yuji Nagata

Super Liger def. Koji Kanemoto

Jinsei Shinzaki def. Michiyoshi Ohara

Shinjiro Otani def. Yoshiaki Tajiri

Kendo Nagasaki def. Tatsutoshi Goto

Masahiro Chono def. Shoji Nakamaki

Masa Saito def. Great Kojika

Antonio Inoki def. Willie Williams

J Crown Championship
Jushin Thunder Liger def. Ultimo Dragon

IWGP Tag Team Championships
Kengo Kimura & Tatsumi Fujinami def. Ookami Gundan (Masahiro Chono & Hiroyoshi Tenzan)

Battle of Double Dealers
Power Warrior def. Great Muta

IWGP Heavyweight Championship
Shinya Hashimoto def. Riki Choshu

New Japan's business was explosive in the mid 1990s. The days of prime-time television exposure were long over, but with a financial focus on live gates, things were doing extremely well. Moreover, NJPW had a money-making resource they didn't have in the prime-time heyday of the early 1980s: licensing.

There was definitely NJPW merchandise around in the '80s, but from 1995 to 1998 it was hard to move for goods. Tshirts, figures, videos and successful video games on the emergent PlayStation and Nintendo 64 platforms meant more money in the bank than ever before. In fact, 1997 would see sales of 4 billion Yen; a peak figure for the company it wouldn't be able to approach until two decades later under different ownership.

The company seemed to be positively bragging about the scale of this second Golden Age, causing the stars of the previous boom to step up, and Wrestle World '97 to have a feel of old versus new. At the top of the card was Riki Choshu's six-month march back to the IWGP Heavyweight Championship culminating against Shinya Hashimoto.

Choshu felt that his career was approaching its twilight, and his role booking the promotion did not gel well with a full-time schedule. Plans were put in motion to retire in 1998, with 1997 to be his last full year. On his way into '97 though, Choshu wanted a blaze of glory. His win in the 1996 G1 Climax, with a perfect record in his block of five (which included his protege Kensuke Sasaki) was treated as an against all odds revival and set him on course for his last chance at the IWGP Heavyweight Championship.

Opposite him was Shinya Hashimoto, a man Choshu had the highest regard for ('Hashimoto, (Masahiro) Chono, (Keiji) Muto, all had a huge influence on wrestling,' he'd reflect in 2015[42], 'but Hashimoto was best of all three. He was one or two steps beyond anybody'). That regard turned into three title reigns for Hashimoto under Choshu's book. This third and final run with the belt was the second reign of his to go longer than a year (a record not matched for another two decades) and would eventually last a record 489 days.

If the story for Choshu was one of the old dog with some fight left in him, then for Hashimoto it was one of the pedigree pit bull in his

prime. Choshu would not hold back one bit on some violent lariats that would stagger but rarely fell the champion, who would reply with vicious kicks and chops. Choshu would kick out of Hashimoto's signature offense, but with less energy each time, until an emphatic brainbuster put the challenger away.

A generational clash was rumbling underneath the main event as well, in Tatsumi Fujinami and Kengo Kimura's last IWGP Tag Team title win. The first ever IWGP tag champions were the old guard challenging Masahiro Chono and Hiroyoshi Tenzan in the midst of their second reign. The ChoTen team had been a factor since 1995, and netted tag gold that same year, albeit with a reign cut short when a family tragedy meant Chono needed time off. Under the Lone Wolf stable (the Anglicisation of the *Ookami Gundan* name was somewhat of a contradiction in terms), Tenzan had a much-needed fire to his character, and Chono was going from strength to strength. By the end of 1997, he would be named Tokyo Sports' most valued player in the entire medium, and his cool heel persona would make him the perfect leader of the New World Order's Japanese arm.

While much is made of U-Inter's invasion of NJPW as what sowed seeds in Eric Bischoff's mind to try an invasion angle in WCW, the nWo seemed to be aesthetically so matched to the black leather, goatee and shades Chono had been donning for a couple of years that it didn't seem like a coincidence. At any rate, a Chono appearance on WCW Nitro in December 1996 was little to write home about from the American fans' perspective, but was newsworthy from the Japanese standpoint, and from the point of view of Wrestling World. Chono walked out to his disqualification loss against Chris Jericho wearing an nWo T shirt, entirely apropos of nothing except an exclamation by Bischoff (who was playing an nWo heel announcer role) of 'hey, I always liked this guy!'. As of January 4 1997, nWo wasn't an entity in Japan, but announcers spoke at length of how Chono got on famously with Hollywood Hogan during his time in America. nWo Japan's impending establishment would see T shirt and other merchandising sales that would go some way to contributing to that record year for NJPW. In the meantime, though, ChoTen lost after controlling Fujinami, but falling victim to the veteran's dragon screws, a dragon sleeper, and a leg lariat from Kimura for a feel good nostalgic moment.

It was Chono's second match of the evening, though with his first going down as the shortest in Tokyo Dome history, fatigue was not much of a factor. Chono brawled with and then handily defeated Shoji

Nakamaki in a hair over a minute in one of four matches that served as exposure on a grand stage for a new deathmatch promotion by the name of Big Japan.

The result of Shinya "Great" Kojika leaving WAR's front office and being joined by Kendo Nagasaki of failed SWS offshoot NOW, Big Japan staged their first show in March of 1995. With Nagasaki as the promotion's *de facto* ace, BJW had a different initial approach to what would make them famous. In line with the explosion of pseudo MMA promotions of the age, Big Japan featured a mix of pro wrestling and legitimate MMA bouts, with a boisterous Nagasaki making claims that he could beat Rickson Gracie.

This was never put to the test, but all signs indicated that Nagasaki couldn't. On September 26 that year, Nagasaki faced kickboxer and UFC1 alum Zane Frazier on an independent MMA card. Nagasaki was unconscious within 40 seconds, and it was clear that a legitimate martial arts themed direction was not going to work with Nagasaki at the helm.

Instead, BJW recruited the likes of Mr. Pogo and Shoji Nakamaki from other independents like W*ING and IWA Japan, taking on a bloodier approach. With deathmatch wrestling as a focus, supplemented by promising junior heavyweights in earlier years and imposing and well-loved heavyweights later on, BJW would survive a difficult infancy. Indeed, thanks to staying within bounds of scale and budget, well over two decades later the promotion would thrive. Regarded as one of Japan's most prominent and prosperous independents, it came a long way from humble beginnings.

An early opportunity on a big stage for Big Japan came in June 1996 at the Yokohama Arena. Antonio Inoki, Giant Baba and many more veterans of the Japan Wrestling Association were present for the *Rikidozan OB Kai* (OB referring to the Japanese English expression 'Old Boy' for alumni). Much like Baseball Magazine's Bridge of Dreams, the event also featured an all-star card, where promotions from New Japan down to various independents were able to put on a match each.

With RIki Choshu having history with Nagasaki and Kojika from his AJPW days, the card allowed him to give BJW some added exposure. Choshu would be asked his thoughts after watching the undercard, stating 'Frankly, if you ask me, this kind of stuff isn't professional wrestling at all'. Nagasaki would fire back that 'the indies are not to

be messed with!', leading to a feud lasting through the autumn. BJW wrestlers appeared ringside on a September 17 New Japan show, and entered the ring to huge boos from the NJPW faithful crowd.

The feud, remarkably similar to ECW and WWF's interpromotional program through 1997, would culminate in slightly disappointing fashion at Wrestling World, despite promising a good deal more. With Choshu railing against the independent scene at large, a series of matches pitting NJPW talent against the cream of various contemporary independent stars was set in place. Independent names backed out one after the other however, with Tarzan Goto, Kenji Takano and even BJW's own main event talent like Mitsuhiro 'Mr. Danger' Matsunaga rejecting the idea.

The resulting compromise was little to get either New or Big Japan fans excited. Great Kojika, limited at 54, was squashed in a comedy affair, half of which was taken up by the referee coaxing the veteran out of his tuxedo and waistcoat, which was adorned with hand grenades. Nagasaki would have a dull brawl with Tatsutoshi Goto, while Nakamaki would throw himself through a barbed wire board in almost apologetic fashion after being beaten by Chono.

The highlight of the BJW versus NJPW debacle was an excellent contest between Shinjiro Otani and Yoshiaki Tajiri. Tajiri, soon to change names to Yoshihiro and spend a long career spell in America, was out to make a statement against Otani. With an intensely aggressive approach that saw him dominate before Otani inevitably responded in trademark style, Tajiri had earned a spot in that summer's Best of the Super Juniors tournament.

Chris Jericho would also find himself in Best of the Super Juniors in 1997, but he had a rather inauspicious debut in the Dome. Koji Kanemoto had spent the latter half of 1996 injured, and on his return in December declared he would take an open challenge to begin the new year and get started on the path back to title contention. Jericho would be Kanemoto's mystery opponent, but not in his typical Lionheart guise.

Instead, Jericho was introduced to New Japan fans as Super Liger, a silver costumed, blond haired counterpart to Jushin Thunder Liger. This was stage one of grand plans for Jericho; much like the original Liger, Super Liger was debuting inside the Tokyo Dome, and with a strong shock victory under his belt, would be set for an intense rivalry with his progenitor. This would be Tiger Mask versus Black Tiger for

the late 1990s, a program that would keep the already strong junior division burning well into the new millennium.

The problem was that it took a special talent and a good deal of acclimatization to wrestle inside the skin tight Liger costume and under the vision restricting mask. Jericho first put the costume on minutes before heading down the ramp, and things headed downhill from there. The crowd, with no context for who Super Liger was supposed to be, sat on their hands, and the early action didn't stir them any. ‘The crowd was going mild,’ Jericho later wrote. ‘I tried to get something going.’[43]

That something was a triangle dropkick that resulted in a slip from ‘Liger’, laughter from the fans and derision from announcers, who spent the rest of the match speculating what the move was supposed to be. ‘When I went for my big leap, my legs felt like they'd been painted with concrete,’ said Jericho. ‘Later one of the employees took my costume “for safekeeping”’. Despite a tiger suplex earning a debut win, it was the last we’d see of Super Liger.

It was a night of low lows, but high highs to contrast them. The original Liger winning the J crown from Ultimo Dragon provided spectacle. Liger had a trying 1996, as the tournament to unify the eight junior titles to form the J Crown was marred by his announcement of a brain tumour. On an earlier tour, Liger was teaming with El Samurai opposite Tatsuhito Takaiwa and Otani. A knock to the head on a missed dive led to a post-match MRI that found a lump near his left ear. Fortunately, the tumour was benign, and after surgery, Liger would be back in just three months. Still, this was arguably a turning point in the career of the junior legend, who would gradually modify his style in such a way that the fans still adored him, but Liger was able to gain remarkable longevity.

In the match, Liger and Dragon each told a tale of trying to ground the other, leading to a slow open, but when Dragon cartwheeled into a spectacular Liger German suplex, things began to escalate. A terrifying Steiner Screwdriver like sit out brain buster earned Liger the eight belts, becoming the third of five J Crown champions.

The biggest spectacle however was a match billed as the ‘Battle of Double Dealers’. Kensuke Sasaki and Keiji Muto had wrestled one another often, but the imposing alter ego of Power Warrior and the mystical Great Muta had never squared off. Sasaki would enter with hair dyed silver and a metallic mask that made him look campy

science fiction, in stark contrast to the face paint and balding head of Muta.

Sasaki would claw at Muta's paint throughout the match, as if desperate to rip away the super human facade and uncover the mortal Muto underneath. The two would engage in a wild brawl into the crowd and over announcers, before some ugly chairshots to the exposed skulls of Sasaki and Muto. Power Warrior, true to the Road Warrior lineage was unfazed by his, while Muta staggered and fell, with the match ending as Sasaki delivered a Northern Lights bomb atop a flat table.

As hard as the blows to the head were to watch the two go through, it was a strong statement of intent for both as 1997 went forward. Muta/Muto would be conflicted by the loss and eventually find himself drawn to a reunion with Chono and the nWo. Sasaki meanwhile would truly arrive in 1997, but not before New Japan once more blurred the lines between pro wrestling and MMA.

New Japan Pro Wrestling
NJPW Battle Formation 1997
April 12, 1997
Attendance: 60,500

Hiroyoshi Tenzan def. Manabu Nakanishi

El Samurai def. Shinjiro Otani

Junji Hirata & Satoshi Kojima def. Kazuo Yamazaki & Osamu Kido

Shiro Koshinaka def. Takashi Ishikawa

J Crown Championship
Jushin Thunder Liger def. Great Sasuke

Antonio Inoki def. Tiger King

Keiji Muto def. Masahiro Chono

IWGP Tag Team Championships
Kensuke Sasaki & Riki Choshu def. Tatsumi Fujinami & Kengo Kimura

Mixed Martial Arts Match
Naoya Ogawa def. Shinya Hashimoto

The final countdown was nearing its end. Antonio Inoki's long retirement tour was approaching a climax, and gears were turning for the biggest Tokyo Dome show of all time to send the New Japan founder off the next year.

Yet Inoki wasn't planning on walking away from the pro wrestling world, and certainly not from combat sports. RINGS and Pancrase had gone from strength to strength, and the MMA bubble in Japan was set to expand as pro wrestling contracted. With the UFC yet to garner the publicity in the West it would gain in the next decade, the international MMA scene was somewhat fragmented.

Three years earlier, an unlikely bridge between New Japan and Satoru Sayama had been mended. Company director Katsuji Nakajima, who had already been instrumental in organizing WAR's relationship with New Japan, reached out to Sayama. By now withdrawn from the pro wrestling scene, and training fighters instead with some notoriously harsh techniques, Sayama was nevertheless still in his 30s, and there was room for him playing an occasional role on New Japan shows. Under the guise of 'The First-Generation Tiger Mask', Sayama had a brief exhibition match with Jushin Liger in May 1994, an experience he enjoyed enough to have a handful of matches for UWFi, Michinoku Pro, and a few other promotions through 1995.

What was most significant about Nakajima's bridge building with Sayama was a thawing of the ice that existed between the original Tiger Mask and Inoki. Now a decade removed from Sayama's tempestuous split from New Japan, he was able to find common ground with Inoki on potential directions for the future of MMA at home and abroad.

The two decided to create a network of fighters and promotions around the world, with a vision of creating an organization that not only could beat out domestic competition, but take a global number one spot that was currently vacant. The result was the 1996 unveiling of the *Sekai Kakutougi Rengou,* or Global Martial Arts Alliance. Inoki and Sayama both set out to recruit fighters with established and legitimate credentials, but with charisma to match. With Masakatsu Funaki and Minoru Suzuki becoming household names for Pancrase, capturing similar lightning in a different bottle would produce stars in both the MMA and pro wrestling fields.

The GMAA had a strong foreign name attached to it early. Ken Shamrock had been the first heavyweight champion in the UFC Stateside, and in Japan had become a key figure in the formation of Pancrase after a strong showcase at the PWFG Stack of Arms Dome show. Shamrock would become Pancrase's first foreign King of Pancrase champion and would develop famed rivalries on both sides

of the Pacific, with Royce Gracie in the US and Suzuki in Japan.

Shamrock had fallings out with both Pancrase and UFC management by 1996 however, and Inoki swooped in. He would be attached to the GMAA project, with a big coming out party for the organization set for Battle Formation '97. A Shamrock win over IWGP champion Shinya Hashimoto would earn instant publicity for the new brand and Shamrock himself, and the non-title nature of the match would serve as a backdrop for a long program between the two; if MMA star Shamrock could beat pro wrestler Hashimoto with the title not on the line, what if the gold was at stake? That Shamrock had a background in pro wrestling, having trained under Gene Anderson and Buzz Sawyer gave him an easy advantage as far as Inoki's plan for a 'two sport star' was concerned.

Unfortunately for Inoki and Sayama, another promoter had his eyes on Shamrock as a pro wrestler with a martial artist's intensity. Vince McMahon brought Shamrock into the World Wrestling Federation in early 1997, with his first big role coming when he refereed the now legendary bout between Steve Austin and Bret Hart at Wrestlemania 13. With Shamrock now a full-time performer for the WWF, plans had to change. Shamrock's understudy was much less experienced in the pro wrestling sphere, but was no less of a name.

Naoya Ogawa had started practicing judo as a high school student. Continuing into university, he became the world free class champion in Essen in 1987, while still a second-year student; he was the youngest in history to achieve such a feat. Ogawa would win three more gold medals at world championships in Belgrade and Barcelona, before representing his country in the 1992 Olympics, where he took silver. Ogawa continued competing in judo into 1996, and was signed by Inoki at the start of 1997, thrust straight into the Hashimoto match as Shamrock's replacement.

With little turnaround before the April bout, Ogawa relied on his judo background, and clad in his gi, with a straightforward approach to the match, Ogawa's novice status wasn't exposed. Instead, as he presented such a different approach to Hashimoto's, or even Takada's a year earlier, it helped that Ogawa was conspicuously lacking in experience. There was a schism between Inoki and the modern era of pro wrestling. Inoki was wary of pro wrestling becoming performance heavy, character wrestlers like Keiji Muto being too Americanized in his eyes. Meanwhile the current breed of pro wrestlers had grown up idolizing the man, Inoki having inspired them to get into the business

and put their own spin on it. The dissonance made for an intriguing pro wrestling story; at least at this early stage.

Tomoyuki Matsumoto
More than the west, in Japan as the internet was still not completely widespread, wrestling was less about a complete story where the build was crucial. It was more in the moment, "who is better?". For me, Ogawa and Hashimoto was the epitome of that. I loved both as a kid so I had mixed emotions. My favourite Tokyo Dome match.

It was a match of Hashimoto's strikes against Ogawa's grappling ability, Hashimoto was outwrestled on the mat and at one point got a bloody nose trying to get out from under his opponent. When free, Hashimoto pummeled Ogawa with overhand chops. 'They just rained down on me,' Ogawa commented afterward. 'I could barely stand, I have no idea how I could stand.'[44]

Eventually though, Ogawa caught Hashimoto in a rear naked choke, and the IWGP champion passed out rather than giving up. Ogawa received a shock win, while Hashimoto retained his title and hero status. 'He showed he's the real thing,' as Hashimoto said. 'But so am I.' The two were off to a long feud that would continue the next month in Osaka and see some controversial ups and downs as it wore on.

Sayama and Inoki, the two founders of what would become known as the Universal Fighting arts Organization would have their own spot opposite each other at Battle Formation. Inoki's penultimate match saw him face Sayama, wrestling as Tiger King in a brief but satisfying affair. With Tiger King performing the recognizable Tiger Mask shuffle, and even the iconic Tiger Mask feint through the ropes, it felt flashier than one would expect from a Sayama who instructed his students to 'watch more Inoki and less Tiger Mask'. This was a nostalgia match however, with a nostalgic finish of an Inoki Cobra Twist. 'Inoki and I have always had more than a simple teacher and student relationship,' remembered Sayama years later. 'I wasn't Tiger Mask for myself, but for Inoki, and for New Japan. So that match was the same. It wasn't something I did for me, but for Inoki, and for New Japan.'[45]

In a convoluted sense, Battle Formation's other major featured singles match was inspired by pro wrestlers taking on martial artists. With Eric Bischoff's experience watching New Japan take on UWFi as its

loose inspiration, the New World Order was seeing record business for WCW just as NJPW was seeing similar financial success.

By April, the nWo had a fully established Japanese arm, albeit one that really only consisted of Masahiro Chono and his already existing Ookami Gundan stable. With the Great Muta being the iconic dark heelish force in New Japan, it would make sense that the two would clash, and the old enemies of Muta and Chono should meet once more in the Dome.

A wild match would see callbacks to previous Dome encounters, as Muta unleashed a now trademark long run up and lariat on the entrance ramp. Chono would fling Muta into table in the corner of the ring, but when trying to brand his opponent with a spray painted 'nWo' across his back, Muta would turn the tables and paint Chono, following up by spraying mist over his back. Muta would pin Chono with a moonsault, but shook hands with his old enemy afterward, declaring that 'Muta is in the nWo.' This would spark a longer program involving the two personae of Muta and Keiji Muto, one being in the nWo and one out.

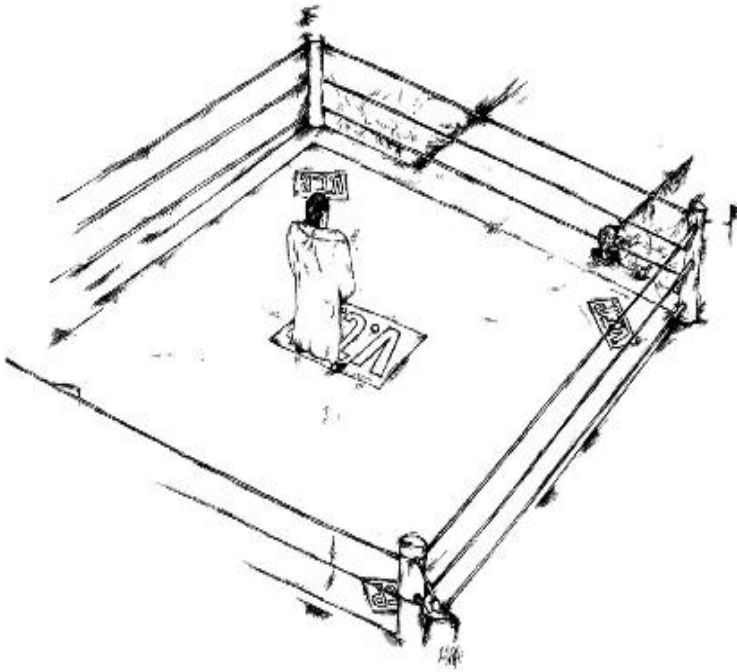
It was a rare occurrence indeed for the New World Order and its parody organization the Blue World Order to share a platform, but that was another element of the Battle Formation show. Dick Togo's Kaientai DX stable had been a featured part of Michinoku Pro for the last few years. Extreme Championship Wrestling had been using the Blue Meanie, Stevie Richards and Nova in parody roles of late to poke fun at the nWo in WCW and the Kliq in the WWF. With Michinoku Pro co-operating with NJPW at home and ECW abroad, Kaientai DX would become bWo Japan in the same way that Chono and company would form the nWo's Japanese branch.

Jinsei Shinzaki
Our philosophy at Michinoku Pro at the time was to let the wrestlers be as free as possible. At that point we had just a bunch of great talent, TAKA Michinoku and Dick Togo, Men's Teio, too, that were working with us and were in a position to go out and work with other promotions within Japan, and out into the world. Our approach was to facilitate that as much as we could, so that then more people would turn their attention on us as a promotion, and more people out in the countryside would feel like they wanted to come and see us.

At Battle Formation, Liger retained the J crown in another spectacular

match. As Liger was interviewed backstage, he was attacked by Kaientai DX, and new associate members Koji Kanemoto and Shinjiro Otani, who had been defeated by El Samurai earlier in the evening. The bWo group vowed to end the careers of Liger, El Samurai and the other flashy masked stars of junior divisions across the country. In New Japan, this led to personal issues making that summer's Best of the Super Juniors tournament, and El Samurai's eventual victory, one of history's best remembered. As far as ECW was concerned, this was another example of how eager Sasuke and company were to help partners. After dives to the outside and defeat from a top rope brainbuster at Liger's hands, Sasuke got straight onto a plane to Philadelphia. One day later, he'd team with Gran Hamada and Masato Yakushiji against the bWo in ECW's first pay per view, Barely Legal.

1998



New Japan Pro Wrestling
NJPW Final Power Hall in Tokyo Dome
January 4, 1998
Attendance: 65,500
Kendo Kashin def. Koji Kanemoto

IWGP Junior Heavyweight Championship
Shinjiro Otani def. Ultimo Dragon

Yuji Nagata def. Hiroyoshi Tenzan

Osamu Nishimura & Tatsumi Fujinami def. Bull Powers
(Manabu Nakanishi & Satoshi Kojima)

Riki Road Final Message Five
Riki Choshu def. Kazuyuki Fujita
Riki Choshu def. Yutaka Yoshie
Riki Choshu def. Tatsuhito Takaiwa
Takashi Iizuka def. Riki Choshu
Riki Choshu def. Jushin Thunder Liger

Mixed Martial Arts
Don Frye def. Naoya Ogawa

Mixed Martial Arts
Shinya Hashimoto def. Dennis Lane

Masahiro Chono def. Shiro Koshinaka

IWGP Heavyweight Championship

Kensuke Sasaki def. Keiji Muto

1997 was a year of great success for New Japan, but it was also a year of preparation. The promotion went through the year knowing 1998 would see two big losses and that they had to get ready for a New Japan without Antonio Inoki, and a New Japan without Riki Choshu.

Choshu was withdrawing from the ring to focus on training and booking. In each role he had his favourite. While his style as an instructor was bitter, gruff and demanding, Choshu would issue rare compliments to Sagamihara resident Shinya Makabe, who made his debut the prior year and would be destined for great things albeit after years of struggle to come. In the front office though, Choshu's pick was Kensuke Sasaki.

Sasaki had been linked to Choshu since the beginning of his career. Even as he headed to the upper end of the card through the 1990s though, it's no surprise that his true breakout year should be Choshu's last complete in-ring one. Shortly before Shinya Hashimoto was choked out by Naoya Ogawa at Battle Formation, Sasaki and Choshu teamed up to defeat Tatsumi Fujinami and Kengo Kimura. One nostalgic tag team title run was replaced by another as Choshu seized his last title in New Japan.

For Sasaki though, it was the start of a wild few months, culminating in a victorious G1 campaign, and then ending Shinya Hashimoto's record long IWGP title reign. The clock stopped at 489 days and Sasaki was finally and decisively made king; all on a show that was part of Choshu's Final Power Hall tour, billed as his last event in Yokohama Arena.

The 30-year-old was clearly Choshu's chosen successor, and with a solid look, power and charisma, for good reason. If it all felt a little too on the nose however, it would have seemed even more so had plans gone ahead that would have had Sasaki taking Choshu's name post retirement. 'They asked me "how would you feel about being called Riki Choshu?",' Sasaki later wrote.[46] 'Choshu is my father figure in wrestling. But to take his name, have everyone who chanted "Kensuke, Kensuke" stop and cheer something else instead would be strange. Choshu's name was already established. I wanted to establish mine.'

For now, Sasaki was facing his second defense of the IWGP title, in a rematch from one year prior, albeit under different guises. Keiji Muto

had fully adopted the 'Black Muto' character in September 1997, completing a turn that had begun when Great Muta joined forces with Masahiro Chono at Battle Formation. The split personality dynamic, with Muto fighting for the core NJPW roster, while his heel alter ego wrestled for the nWo had been a fascinating one to watch.

Now fully an nWo member though, he was open for a memorable tag team run with Chono and some fresh singles matches, including with Sasaki as character dynamics changed. Sasaki overpowered Muto in the early going with arm work, but the more dynamic Muto would assault the champions knee with missile dropkicks. Eventually Sasaki would counter a top rope Frankensteiner into a brutal powerbomb and land a pair of Northern Lights Bombs to retain his belt. It was a memorable match, but one that smacked of the kind of physicality that was taking its toll on Muto and would require him to take the spring off with knee issues.

The true main event, though, was Choshu's retirement ceremony, which closed the show after his last match went in the middle of the card. Well, last matches, at any rate. Choshu managed to squeeze at least a year's worth of Inoki Final Countdown bouts into one night as he faced his Final Message Five, one after the other.

The first two in the gauntlet were students of Choshu's in the dojo. Kazuyuki Fujita and Yutaka Yoshie were early on in their careers despite having entered the company a good while earlier; Fujita had been participating in amateur tournaments while still training in the dojo, while Yoshie had his young career temporarily halted by a broken leg.

Yoshie and Fujita were both dispensed with in quick fashion with Riki Lariats. For two still in the preliminary phase of their careers to make their first steps on a grand stage with their mentor was far from damaging. Perhaps more harmful was Tatsuhito Takaiwa's quick loss to a Scorpion Deathlock. Takaiwa had been teaming with Koji Kanemoto and Shinjiro Otani, making strong progress as a junior after toiling on the under and mid card since late 1992. His, and Jushin Liger's final defeat rang ominously of Choshu's de-focusing of the junior division in years to come; the Liger and Choshu segment was a spectacular one however, including as it did Perhaps Choshu's first and last career plancha as fans and announcers reacted with amazement.

The Final Message Five was really designed to elevate Takashi Iizuka.

After nearly a decade opening shows and appearing in multi man tag matches, him being the one man of the five to pin Choshu perhaps should have led to at least a challenge issued to Choshu's protege. No Sasaki match would take place until two years later though, as Iizuka's position on the card continued to fluctuate.

As Choshu retired, he thanked the audience for their support. 'With your help, I was able to keep running for twenty years. Thank you to my peers and students.' He thanked his own teacher in Antonio Inoki as well, Inoki closing by reminding the crowd his own Final Countdown would end in April.

While Inoki didn't wrestle at Final Power Hall, his presence was felt in a pair of MMA style matches to promote the nascent UFO project. Shinya Hashimoto was put opposite kickboxer Dennis 'Hurricane' Lane, while Don Frye, who had debuted with New Japan earlier in the summer, would face Naoya Ogawa. The contrasting MMA matches would keep the Ogawa and Hashimoto rivalry buzzing, while providing……. some hype for UFO's official launch later in October. Frye, already having established himself in the UFC Stateside, was a major name for Inoki to clinch, and a fitting foreign star replacement for Ken Shamrock one year earlier. Frye's win over Ogawa was a significant start to 1998. His pro wrestling career would blossom through 1998 and 1999 as UFO would struggle to get off the ground, and by the time he turned back to MMA full time in 2001, he was able to bring some level of celebrity status to PRIDE.

If the crowd welcomed Frye and Ogawa, they were cooler on Hashimoto and Lane, especially as the match hit an abrupt and confusing end. After Lane tried to stick and run against the larger Hashimoto in slow opening seconds, Hashimoto went in for a takedown Lane wasn't prepared for. A legitimate leg injury after just a hair over a minute of action frustrated Hashimoto and bemused fans who were glad to see more typical pro wrestling antics of Masahiro Chono and the nWo follow.

nWo Japan's presence was not limited to the top two matches on the card. Yuji Nagata made a mid WCW excursion return for one night to battle Hiroyoshi Tenzan. Nagata's fire in attacking his fellow third generation star at the bell was met with roars of approval from a crowd who were soon reminded of the young Nagata's potential. While they were unfamiliar with the Nagata Lock that would secure his win, the stage was clearly set for a heroic full-time return.

Meanwhile, Osamu Nishimura would tease joining the New World Order by revealing an nWo T shirt before teaming with Tatsumi Fujinami. While the move drew the ire of Manabu Nakanishi and Satoshi Kojima in the opposing corner, nWo's Masa Saito quickly defused speculation to those at home with a blunt 'I didn't hear anything about him joining.' This was Nishimura's biggest Tokyo Dome match to date after a pair of preliminary multi man tags, and a frustrating early career.

Nishimura had debuted in 1991, but had received little in the way of focus from the company. After wrestling extensively in the States for Smoky Mountain Wrestling and even a pre-Extreme Eastern Championship Wrestling, Nishimura returned and aligned himself with Fujinami's MUGA project. As MUGA faltered, he headed abroad again, this time to Germany. 1998, Nishimura vowed, would see his final return, and if things didn't take off for him this time, he wouldn't come back.

Nishimura would upset Kojima with a Northern Lights suplex and would go on to have a strong 1998. He would be diagnosed with cancer late in the year however, and his rise wouldn't continue until he defeated the disease in 2001.

New Japan Pro Wrestling
Inoki the Final
April 4, 1998
Attendance: 70,000

Inoki Final Tournament
Naoya Ogawa def. Brian Johnston

Inoki Final Tournament
Don Frye def. Igor Meindert

Bull Powers (Manabu Nakanishi & Satoshi Kojima) def. Hiroyoshi Tenzan & Hiro Saito

Heisei Ishingun (Michiyoshi Ohara, Shiro Koshinaka & Tatsutoshi Goto) def. Junji Hirata, Kazuo Yamazaki & Tadao Yasuda

Tatsuhito Takaiwa def. Koji Kanemoto

Shinjiro Otani def. Yuji Yasuraoka

Inoki Final Tournament
Don Frye def. Naoya Ogawa

IWGP Junior Heavyweight Championship
Jushin Thunder Liger def. Kendo Kashin

IWGP Tag Team Championship
nWo Japan (Keiji Muto & Masahiro Chono) def. Osamu Nishimura & Shinya Hashimoto

IWGP Heavyweight Championship
Tatsumi Fujinami def. Kensuke Sasaki

Antonio Inoki def. Don Frye

‘There are people who think that 55 isn't a big number age wise, and people who think that it's a lot. I happen to think that it's a lot. I spent 38 of those years in the ring. There's nothing left that I haven't done (...) I don't have a single regret, and that's why I didn't shed any tears tonight. There was no need for any. I was happy to clearly, properly say my goodbyes.’

Antonio Inoki had been saying his goodbyes as a pro wrestler for the best part of a decade, but the final countdown finally stopped on April 4, 1998. The exact capacity of Tokyo Dome wrestling setups has never been clear thanks to the wrestling tradition of inflating attendance numbers being followed from Battle Satellite in 1989 onward. Here, the Dome was more than sold out as the building overflowed with public present to witness the final moments in the career of an icon. Fans flooded walkways on the upper deck, allowed in but not counted as fire safety codes were breached[47]. The live gate, equivalent to 7 million US Dollars, set a record for pro wrestling and combat sports in Japan that still stands, and was the biggest in pro wrestling history worldwide up to that point in time.

The match, a four-minute affair, was curtailed as Inoki nursed bad ribs and an injured ankle. Its simple story of Don Frye outperforming his opponent on the ground before Inoki replied with a trademark Enzuigiri and Cobra Twist was far from spectacular. Yet, of course, it didn't matter. The spectacle, which included orchestral arrangements of Inoki Bom-Ba-Ye playing over narrated video highlights of Inoki’s career, a parade of stars past and present offering flowers and Muhammad Ali lighting an Olympic style torch to represent the ever-burning fighting spirit: that was the main event (and from a cost perspective, rightly so; Ali took a 500 million Yen payday for his brief appearance[48]).

With the match itself being secondary, the positioning of Don Frye as Inoki’s opponent made sense. This was not to be an epic encounter of the past and present of New Japan, but rather a chance to build to the future, and Inoki’s future in charge of UFO specifically. The Universal Fighting arts Organization was set for an October launch, and all of Inoki’s promotional muscle was being put behind Frye and Naoya Ogawa as the company’s stars. To that end, a tournament was set up, the semis and final matches set for the April show with the winner facing Inoki in his last bout.

Both tournament favourites would interact with Inoki over the weeks leading up to his retirement. After Ogawa defeated Frye in a Budokan rematch from January 4's Final Power Hall show, the American attacked Ogawa leading Inoki to brawl with Frye. Inoki would go on to train with Ogawa in America and Okinawa, the inference being that Inoki would pass the torch to Ogawa as his MMA ace heir apparent. Ultimately though, inoki's in ring career ended, fittingly as it had flourished, the Japanese hero triumphing over an imposing foreign heel.

There was no doubt over the attraction most of the '70,000' were paying to see on April 4, 1998. With the retirement ceremony overshadowing Inoki's final match itself, much of the undercard would be similarly overlooked. It featured a brace of junior matches, with Koji Kanemoto defeated by an ascendant Tatsuhito Takaiwa, Shinjiro Otani defeating WAR guest Yuji Yasuraoka and Tokimitsu Ishikawa's second unsuccessful IWGP Junior title challenge since his reinvention as Kendo Kashin. These matches had their moments, but the two heavyweight title matches on the card told more compelling tales.

In a year with such a huge pair of retirements, Tatsumi Fujinami was not going to join contemporary Riki Choshu in the office quite yet. He would in short order, however. By the summer of 1999, Seiji Sakaguchi would step down as president of NJPW to take a diminished representative director role. Fujinami would take his stead, and much like Sakaguchi, would dramatically reduce his schedule as a result. With his full-time years nearly at an end, Fujinami wanted one more run at the top, and would talk about Inoki and Choshu's retirements inspiring him to make one last run.

It was fitting, then, that he'd face Kensuke Sasaki for the IWGP title, reviving the long Choshu rivalry with the man who was Riki Choshu '98 in all but name (and the name part was a close-run thing). It was a match about Sasaki trying to live up to the expectations Choshu had placed upon him and paying with the title as a result. In the closing minutes, Sasaki would hit his challenger with a Northern Lights Bomb that should have scored him a pinfall victory. When he tried to mimic his mentor and follow up with a Scorpion Deathlock however, Fujinami would escape. Tellingly, Fujinami would be unable to hit a trademark Dragon Suplex, but instead landed a bridging German for the win, the veteran of 1980s wars being the one not to let obsession with history get the better of him. Fujinami's last IWGP win was a genuine feel good moment, and his place in the New Japan

establishment would make him a prime opponent for Masahiro Chono and the nWo going forward.

For Inoki's final show, Chono would team up with Keiji Muto to take on Shinya Hashimoto and a hot Osamu Nishimura. Nishimura was riding a wave of momentum from his pinfall on Kojima back in January. With his tease of joining the nWo not sitting well with the group, Nishimura would have to find a new partner to take on the Chono and Muto combination, settling on the former IWGP champion. Nishimura would play the clear underdog role, emphasised by his Young Lion-esque featureless ring gear. Nishimura would memorably fire up in the face of repeated Chono Kenka Kicks, staggering but refusing to fall; it would all be in vain as Chono placed the unlikely challenger in a Butterfly Lock for the submission win.

Inoki's final address on the microphone as an active wrestler would forever echo in fans' memories. 'On your walk through life, if you give up on new challenges, that's when you start to really grow old. You might not know where the road will lead you, but there's no room for doubt. You must step forth. The path is made by the footsteps you leave. If you get lost, keep going and see what happens.'

Inoki's retirement was obviously the end of an era, but in more ways than just the retirement of a legend. After peak business in 1997, New Japan was still going strong, but the show and its record attendance would represent the end of a golden age. Quite how the promotion would emerge from the long shadow of its founder was in question; for now, there was no room for doubt, only for that step into the unknown.

All Japan Pro Wrestling
AJPW 25th Anniversary
May 1, 1998
Attendance: 58,300

Satoru Asako def. Yoshinobu Kanemaru

Maunakea Mossman def. Daisuke Ikeda

Jumbo Tsuruta, Mitsuo Momota & Rusher Kimura def. Haruka Eigen, Masanobu Fuchi & Tsuyoshi Kikuchi

The Headhunters (Headhunter A & Headhunter B) def. Shigeo Okumura & Tamon Honda

Johnny Smith & Wolf Hawkfield def. Jado & Gedo

Akira Taue, Mighty Inoue & Takao Omori def. Hideki Hosaka, Tatsuhiro Kuroda & The Gladiator

Triangle of Power (Gary Albright & Steve Williams) def. Masahito Kakihara & Yoshihiro Takayama

Giant Baba, Hayabusa & Kentaro Shiga def. Giant Kamala, Jinsei Shinzaki & Jun Izumida

Jun Akiyama def. Hiroshi Hase

GET (Johnny Ace & Kenta Kobashi) def. Stan Hansen & Vader

Triple Crown Championship
Toshiaki Kawada def. Mitsuharu Misawa

The last time All Japan promoted a show at the Tokyo Dome, they were facing a turning point that could have meant the end of the company. The 1990 Wrestling Summit took place as Megane Super was gathering steam for SWS, and immediately before a massive exodus of talent and office staff.

Necessity being the mother of invention, what could have doomed AJPW instead sparked massive success. Without the swathe of established talent Genichiro Tenryu took with him to SWS, Giant Baba was forced to bring younger talent to the forefront. Mitsuharu Misawa was chief among them, as he shed his Tiger Mask after the Wrestling Summit show and almost immediately embroiled himself in a feud with Jumbo Tsuruta.

Even as Tenryu had been in ascension through the decade, Tsuruta had been the very symbol of AJPW in the 1980s under Baba. His ace status had been confirmed the prior year when uniting the PWF

Heavyweight title and the NWA International and UN titles under the Triple Crown. Yet a new wave of talent was needed in the next decade. Voices like ShuPro magazine's Tarzan Yamamoto, consulting with Baba, convinced the AJPW owner that Misawa had to beat Tsuruta, and had to do so via pinfall[49]. A reluctant Tsuruta would offer to have Misawa beat him via disqualification, but the company was resolute, and on June 8 1990 Misawa cemented himself as a main event star with an emotional Budokan win.

Misawa's ascendancy kick started a new era in All Japan. Baba had said he would protect professional wrestling while other promotions chased martial arts, and this was not empty talk. After Wrestling Summit, Baba would create a walled garden in All Japan, setting more concrete contracts for talent that meant wrestlers both Japanese and foreign would be exclusive to AJPW. Meanwhile, a further potential setback turned into more opportunity for the company; as Tsuruta took time away to recover from Hepatitis B, Misawa and Tsuruta's feud gave way to a focus on three more young talents.

Misawa would be joined by Toshiaki Kawada, Kenta Kobashi and Akira Taue to form the *Puroresu Shi Tennou:* Wrestling's Four Kings (or pillars) of Heaven. The nomenclature was handed down by Baba to his four former students after he, Inoki, Kintaro Oki and Michiaki Yoshimura received the same classification in the 1960s. Just as those four, Inoki and Baba especially, were innovators that would see their influence resonate for decades, the *Tennou* innovated their own style; *Oudou*, or King's Road.

King's Road was honed with Baba's desire to distinguish AJPW from its competitors in mind. In deference to the pure sporting fandom that had sprung up around UWFi and nascent MMA, disqualifications were stripped out, as was, for the most part, interference or other cliched illegal acts. Instead, the fat was trimmed away from a lean and earnest in ring presentation.

King's Road as a more narrative style of wrestling, and one that for the most part spurned submissions, instead favouring decisive pinfalls. 'Baba loathed submissions,' Kawada would recall in 2011. 'One, two, three was the rule, especially in Triple Crown matches... each match was about breaking the limit you set in the last.'[50]To get to these finishes was a matter of maneuvers that steadily escalated in ferocity and danger. Usually focused on the head and neck, the philosophy behind the style was that wrestlers would unleash everything they had on their opponent until someone was simply unable to stand; as

referee Kyohei Wada remarked ‘Baba told the younger talent “whatever you want to do, do it, and whatever you can show the people, show it”[51]’. ‘He said that if one move didn't get you a three count, it made no sense to do the same thing and expect different results. So King’s Road was about escalating toward a crescendo. Refereeing these matches was like conducting a symphony’.

For better and for worse, it was a style that enthralled hardcore fans, that inspired countless wrestlers worldwide, and arguably shortened careers and lives. Matches the Four Kings had would etch themselves in the minds of a generation, yet All Japan was not without issues. As had been the case for most of its 25 years, AJPW had difficulty operating consistently in the black. AJPW had action figures and videogames, and its stars had mainstream media coverage, but sales and, importantly, TV viewer numbers were not where they needed to be, especially in comparison to New Japan’s boom. Nippon TV were no longer willing to bail the company out as they had in the 1980s, and changes had to be made.

‘You were starting to see Baba try all sorts of new things,’ remembered Masanobu Fuchi, who was a 24 year AJPW veteran by the time the Tokyo Dome anniversary show rolled around, and is still active in and out of the ring for the company today. ‘Tsuruta was starting to get sick again, and it wasn’t enough to go with what we had. Baba had isolated the roster before, but you started to get Hayabusa, Jinsei Shinzaki and Hiroshi Hase in’[52]. Hase was a particularly big deal, as despite his political career making him a part timer when wrestling was concerned, his appearance in a November 1996 AJPW show mere months after walking away from New Japan evoked memories of the roster jumps made in the heat of the promotional rivalry of the early 1980s.

Still, something big needed to happen to gain more eyes for the company, and the idea was floated to run a belated 25th anniversary event within the Tokyo Dome. It was a decision that had a fair few detractors; Misawa and Kobashi spoke out specifically about wanting to stick to the familiar stomping ground of the Nippon Budokan.

Kenta Kobashi
The experiences I had there were important, but I'm not hugely attached to the Tokyo Dome. The fans are a long way from the ring, it's hard to hear them, and a lot of fans show up and just find themselves looking at the screen instead of the ring. I have a lot more fondness for Nippon Budokan.

Ultimately, a compromise was reached. Multiple anniversary shows would allow for a traditionalist Budokan card to be joined by a Tokyo Dome show that had a different feel and could potentially act as a soft reset of the AJPW product as it embarked on a new era for the next quarter century.

With that in mind, initial plans for the anniversary show presented an idea of a very different product. Atsushi Onita would lend talent from FMW, and was set to wrestle himself, in an exploding ring deathmatch. Meanwhile, when Gerry Brisco showed up at Korakuen to help Giant Baba mark his 60th birthday, a tentative relationship was formed with the WWF. Had the relationship paid off, Barry WIndham and Justin Bradshaw of the New Blackjacks would have been brought over to team on the show, and a top-level WWF talent would have wrestled Misawa in the main event.

Munehiro Hashimoto
To an extent, it's a good thing that AJPW only ever ran the Tokyo Dome a few times. The more that kind of scale of an event happens, the more there's a perceived need to get outside talent, which limits the space for the wrestlers that are there, and ultimately isn't what the fans want to see.

The proposed reset switch was never hit. Baba would ultimately veto the idea ('He said if we were to do this, it had to be as service to our fans, and we had to lead with our own best matches'[53], Fuchi would recall) leading to a more traditional card, with a few twists.
Jim Ross
Money was a culprit in this as the All Japan folks thought our talents weren't over in Japan, and thus would've earned less than if they had stayed in the States. We tried to reach out and establish a relationship, but they didn't seem adequately motivated to close the deal.

For All Japan Pro Wrestling in 1998, the homegrown best match that Baba desired meant Kawada and Misawa. The pair had been tied together since before their careers even began. They were high school amateur teammates before entering the All Japan dojo one year apart[54]. By ages 19 and 20 respectively they were in preliminary bouts opposite one another. It had taken fifteen years though for Kawada to score a pinfall victory over Misawa, in an emotional final to the Champion Carnival tournament the prior spring. The win shone a new light on the rivalry between the two, one where Kawada was on

level footing with, and could beat the man one year his senior in age and experience.

The match was typical of the King's Road main event style, starting fast with kicks and a tope from Misawa and leading to some terrifying backdrops and suplex exchanges between the two. Kawada resisted the Tiger Bombs and suplexes Misawa had carried from his days under the famous mask. After a brutal looking brain buster followed by a powerbomb didn't get the win for Kawada, a second powerbomb sealed the deal. Kawada's long road to his first Triple Crown Championship complete, he'd tell the crowd after the bell that it was the happiest he'd ever been in his wrestling life.

The other featured singles bout on the card saw Hiroshi Hase in his first match after a four-month absence. His opponent was Jun Akiyama. Both products of Senshi University's amateur wrestling team, there was a freshman versus senior style to much of the match, the pair exchanging holds on the mat for the bulk of the near thirty minutes. When the pair stood up though, as they exchanged a furious series of exploder and uranage suplexes, the crowd came alive. Twice the bridge on Hase's Northern Lights Suplex gave way due to the knee focused on early in the match, leading to a wrist clutch exploder and an Akiyama victory. Having debuted six years prior, Akiyama was making steady advances to be considered in the main event mix by 1998, though he wouldn't be granted the Triple Crown until the company was in much different shape.

Hase wasn't the only big-name transition to All Japan, as Yoshihiro Takayama was a significant free agent signing in 1997. Without a promotional home as UWFi's feud with WAR faded and then the company disappeared altogether, Takayama was inserted into a program with Toshiaki Kawada on signing. Takayama's presence represented the push for the new against the pull of the home grown and dyed in the wool; he quickly found himself tumbling down cards, and in this case working as foil for the fearsome Steve Williams. The Oklahoman charged at Takayama to approving cheers from the crowd in their tag match, but Williams lived up to his Dr. Death name, looking psychotic as he delivered his winning backdrop suplex to Takayama, and being pulled back by partner Gary Albright lest he repeat the move after the bell.

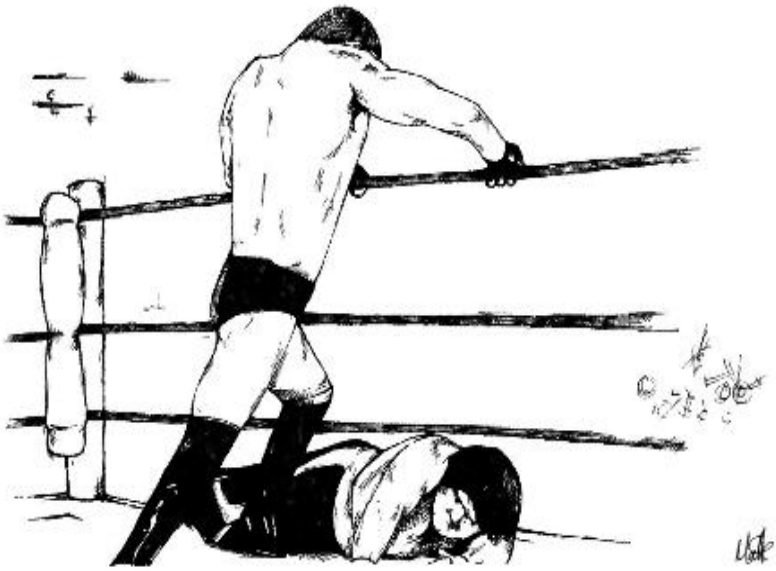
Outsiders of a less permanent nature played support roles and lent some variety to the card. The Headhunters, Mike Awesome as the Gladiator, and Hayabusa all appeared from FMW as a substitute for

the aforementioned Onita deathmatch. Hayabusa was the most intriguing selection, as the high-flying ace would form a trio with the just recently debuted Kentaro Shiga and none other than Baba himself. They stood opposite Jinsei Shinzaki, visiting from Michinoku Pro, but with All Japan partners in Jun Izumida and Giant Kimala. The sight of former WWF star Kamala combined with the Buddhist trappings of Shinzaki's character was a remarkable one, as was the visual contrast of Hayabusa with Baba. Hayabusa would be given the spotlight in the match, winning with a Firebird splash on Shinzaki.

Jinsei Shinzaki
It was just such an honour for me to have this match. Michinoku Pro carried a lot of lucha into wrestling, but I was always more straightforward Japanese style. To me there's a direct line from the origins of wrestling in Japan with Rikidozan to his student Giant Baba who he just imparted so much too. And then Baba would impart all of that knowledge, all of that essence to his students in Misawa, in Kawada, Kobashi and so on. So to actually be able to share a ring with Baba was a career goal for me. When the Dome match was made, it was exactly the same feeling as when the Muta match was set up, a dream becoming reality.

Baba stood tall in the mid card, but was obviously limited by size and age. He had more pressing health issues too, ones which would see All Japan return to the Tokyo Dome in much sadder circumstances one year later.

1999



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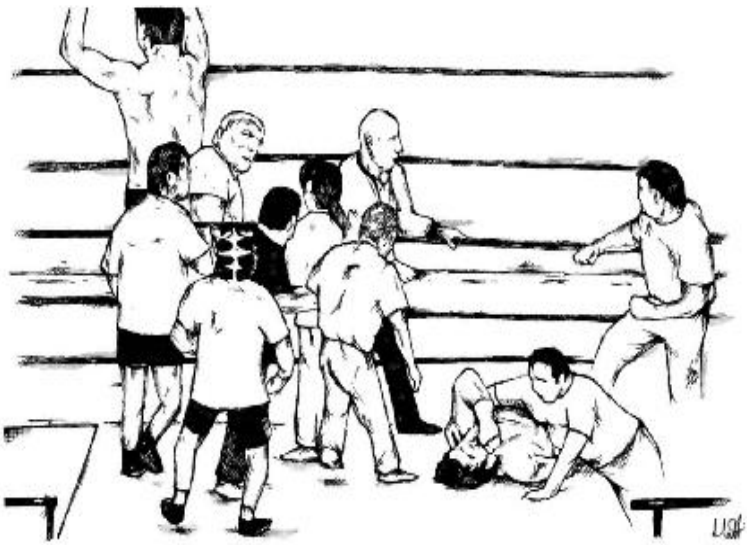


New Japan Pro Wrestling
NJPW Wrestling World in Tokyo Dome 1999
January 4, 1999
Attendance 62,500

Manabu Nakanishi def. Kazuyuki Fujita

Osamu Kido, Tadao Yasuda & Tatsumi Fujinami def. Heisei Ishingun (Kengo Kimura, Michiyoshi Ohara & Tatsutoshi Goto)

IWGP Junior Heavyweight Tag Team Championships
Dr. Wagner Jr. & Kendo Kashin def. Shinjiro Otani & Tatsuhito Takaiwa

IWGP Junior Heavyweight Championship
Jushin Thunder Liger def. Koji Kanemoto

Kensuke Sasaki def. Atsushi Onita (DQ)

Yuji Nagata def. Dave Beneteau

Don Frye def. Brian Johnston

Naoya Ogawa vs. Shinya Hashimoto: No Contest

IWGP Tag Team Championships
nWo Japan (Satoshi Kojima & Hiroyoshi Tenzan) def. Genichiro Tenryu & Shiro Koshinaka

IWGP Heavyweight Championship
Keiji Muto def. Scott Norton

By 1999, Antonio Inoki's UFO project had finally launched, but not quite with the scope and success that its bosses had envisaged. The global MMA promotion with plans for shows in India and America by the close of '98 had become a UWF-esque shoot style pro wrestling company, with a domestic launch.

On October 24 1998, UFO Take Off, headlined by the twin aces of Naoya Ogawa and Don Frye, took place in Ryogoku. Despite the hype and name value amassed in New Japan, Sumo Hall was not filled; sources indicated an announced crowd of 10,000 was closer to 8000 in reality. A follow up show in December drew similar numbers in the former New Japan stomping ground of Osaka Jo Hall.
The promotion was destined to run just three times in 1999, in Yokohama, Osaka and a 'European Take Off' in Holland. Ironically enough, that would be the last show in UFO's lifetime proper as a promotion. Yet the energy Inoki and Satoru Sayama had put into recruiting and forming a vision for UFO had to be spent somewhere. Thus began the 'Inoki-ism' era of New Japan, the pseudo shoot philosophy permeating the promotion in the new millennium.

At Wrestling World '99 however, UFO was still very much a young, going entity. UFO's Yokohama Arena card was coming up in March, and to try and drive attention to the product, a trio of NJPW vs UFO matches were pushed hard to the audience. Yuji Nagata, returning from WCW, would beat Canadian judoka Dave Beneteau with an arm triangle in a pedestrian affair. Don Frye would beat Brian Johnston in a more spirited match that showed Frye's easy charisma that was earning him mainstream attention in Japan. Yet it was the third match of the trio that garnered the most attention, rightly or wrongly.

Naoya Ogawa looked different from the outset heading into his deciding match with Shinya Hashimoto that had been over a year and a half in the making. Shedding his judo gi for a contemporary MMA look of shorts and fingerless gloves, he looked less clean cut, more rugged, and eager for a fight. Knowing Inoki and Sayama's desire to make a statement on behalf of UFO through Ogawa, Katsuji Nagashima approached both before the entrance.

'Nothing weird's going on tonight?'
'Nothing at all.'[55]

Hashimoto danced around Ogawa and ducked under his opponent's swings, and the pair exchanged jabs as if feeling one another out. When tangled in the ropes, referee Tiger Hattori tried to separate the pair, only to be sent tumbling for his efforts.

They finally separated, but shortly afterward, Ogawa took Hashimoto down and opened up on the former IWGP champion from a full mount. The punches and elbows thrown to Hashimoto's exposed face were ugly, and it was clear the NJPW representative was in trouble.

He got a foot to the bottom rope, but as Ogawa broke off his foe, he unloaded a soccer ball like kick to Hashimoto's skull. Hashimoto somehow stood back up, but it was for one final time; Ogawa pushed Hashimoto to the ropes, and Tiger Hattori again was knocked down. Without a referee, Ogawa caught Hashimoto in a rear mount and rained blow after blow to the back of his head. Ogawa stood, Hashimoto could not. After another kick to the head, Hashimoto's corner men rolled him to the outside.

The bell was rung, and with no referee to call the result, the fans were informed it was a no contest. Ogawa jeered at the New Japan corner and the fans as Sayama tried to play peacemaker between UFO and NJPW contingents ready to brawl. Manabu Nakanishi, who had beaten Kazuyuki Fujita in the opening match, was livid and yelled in the face of Ogawa. Riki Choshu stormed to the ring and punched Ogawa in the jaw before being held back by Hashimoto himself, just finding his feet.

The match would be referred to as the *i ten yon jihen:* 'the January 4 incident'. Bringing behind the scenes tension to the front of house spotlight, it became modern Japanese wrestling's most famous 'cement match'. Just over a year after Bret Hart's controversial departure from the WWF at the 1997 Survivor Series, the high emotions, post mortem analysis and conspiracy theories both generated made them comparable in significance to their respective territories.

Dave Meltzer
It was such a weird thing to happen. Ogawa was definitely really trying to hurt Hashimoto, even though I know they were friendly. Elbows to the spine and everything, all under Inoki's manipulations. Hashimoto had a tough guy rep for New Japan at the time, and in hindsight, this program would really hurt him a lot.

Unlike the Montreal Screwjob though, much of the speculation

surrounding the match would remain just that as those directly involved would remain publicly silent. Even if Ogawa's assault had been less ferocious, a non-finish seemed the likely direction with Hattori being removed from the equation. Indeed, in 2015 Akira Maeda would recount a telephone conversation with Hashimoto immediately following the bout where his friend told him he didn't fire back at Ogawa out of professional duty ('I told him respecting the booking is one thing, but not when you run the risk of being irreparably damaged,' Maeda said[56]). Satoru Sayama's own account bore that out, but that Ogawa's beat down was far more vicious than planned. 'As far as I was concerned, we were going out as usual… (Ogawa) shouldn't have gone that far. I got in there because I thought he'd kill (Hashimoto)'.[57]
A common theory behind the incident was that Ogawa acted on Inoki's behalf. Inoki supposedly gave the order for Ogawa to do as much to Hashimoto as he could get away with, the controversy benefitting everyone in the long run. '(Inoki)'s a smart man,' Sayama would reflect. 'He doesn't just push what he thinks is a good idea, but for what's good all around. If that's what he did, that (incident) got a huge amount of attention on both guys.'[58] Jushin Liger too would note 'I don't have proof, so I can't say… it seems somebody got in Ogawa's ear and told him that this was the way for him to make his mark.'[59]

With the crowd in shock at what had just happened, the following two title matches on the card had a tough time. Hiroyoshi Tenzan and Satoshi Kojima winning the IWGP tag titles from Shiro Koshinaka and Genichiro Tenryu deserved much more attention than it got.

Tenryu was undergoing somewhat of a revival as an in-ring talent. Financial issues for WAR had mounted as audience declined throughout 1998. In November it was reclassified as an entertainment company rather than a wrestling promotion, and its entire roster was let go. While WAR shows still ran through 1999, with anniversary shows in 2000 and 2006, it was with cards of freelancers. In New Japan, Tenryu joined forces with longtime Heisei Ishingun rival Koshinaka.

Their challengers came together through a shakeup of nWo Japan. After a fourteen-year journey, Masahiro Chono finally claimed his first IWGP Heavyweight Championship from Tatsumi Fujinami the prior summer. His reign would only last a month, however. Chono had been working with a neck broken by Steve Austin all the way back in 1994, and the damage was too much to keep going with. With Chono away,

Keiji Muto assumed the reins as nWo Japan leader, and over the coming months the stable would turn from cool heels to genuine fan favourites. Muto would recruit Kojima to the group, and the TenKoji tag team was formed.

The match was an impressive physical display, despite fans still being in shocked silence. Tenryu, just days from his 49th birthday, was as aggressive as anyone two decades his junior, and their young challengers gave as good as they got. Tenzan would finally get the crowd engaged in the action with a moonsault to the floor, followed by a top rope spinning heel kick and a head butt for the win. The narrative was that TenKoji were functioning as two singles stars put together rather than a well-oiled team unit, but their chemistry, both together and opposite one another, would only grow over the next twenty years.

In the main event, Muto would challenge Scott Norton, who had made a surprise ascent to main event singles contention. In the wake of Chono's injury, Norton was called over from a WCW that barely used him and beat Yuji Nagata in a tournament for the vacated IWGP title. With Muto representing a new direction for the group, Norton was Chono's hand-picked successor, leading to an all nWo main event.

While Norton and Muto were electric in tag encounters earlier in the decade, Norton, heavier and wrestling a long form main event style, was less exciting in a singles position. After long exchanges focused on Norton's knees, Muto would pin Norton with a moonsault. nWo Japan would pose in solidarity at the end of the show, but without Chono, as seeds were planted for the January 4 main event one year later.

Chono's next Tokyo Dome match wouldn't be with Muto, however, but unlikely as it seemed, Atsushi Onita. All Japan's decision to use Hayabusa, the Headhunters and the Gladiator in the prior May's anniversary show over an exploding deathmatch with Onita was demonstrative of FMW's philosophy at large. Onita's deathmatch style had less of a place in FMW, and to an extent, wrestling in general at the close of the millennium. Onita decided to leave FMW and go freelance in 1998, and after some time away to receive his high school diploma at age 41, found himself in New Japan.

While the core NJPW roster would struggle for power with UFO and nWo contingents, Onita was a rebellious figure, representing *jado puroresu* (heretic wrestling). Very much incongruous to his surroundings, he'd emerge clad in a leather jacket, smoking a cigarette

and clutching a chair, before running down NJPW and his fans. Yelling at an audience he perceived as '*takoyaro'* (literally 'Octopus Guys', but closer in American wrestlers' parlance to 'jackasses'), Onita's charisma would certainly find its followers. Indeed, Onita would capitalise with a somewhat tongue in cheek book collecting his put downs. At Wrestling World however, he was largely reviled, and facing a furious Kensuke Sasaki. On entering the company, Onita had instantly waged war with authority figure Riki Choshu, leading Sasaki to stand up for his teacher, claiming he didn't respect Onita as a wrestler but rather as a comedian.[60]

The ensuing wild brawl was violent as it was brief, Onita unleashing unprotected chair shots to Sasaki's skull, and delivering a piledriver through a ringside table. In ring, with Sasaki in control, Onita flung a fireball into his opponent's face to prompt the referee to finally throw the match out. Onita would ridicule NJPW and its fans for their adherence to rules, while Sasaki yelled he wouldn't be forgiven. Onita's anti-authoritarian stance would eventually pull Riki Choshu out of retirement, as he brought his literally explosive gimmick match style to the New Japan audience throughout 1999.

A footnote to Wrestling World was the Tokyo Dome debut of the IWGP junior tag team championships. New Japan in general would be focused on heavyweights in the coming years, but for the time being, the junior tag titles were sold as bringing parity to the two weight classes. Shinjiro Otani and Tatsuhito Takaiwa had held the belts since their August 8 introduction, the straight-laced pair continuing their feud against the masked Juniors. Kendo Kashin and CMLL's Dr. Wagner Junior took the titles, which would become a staple opening act on Tokyo Dome shows to come.

New Japan Pro Wrestling
NJPW Strong Style Symphony: New Japan Spirit '99
April 10, 1999
Attendance: 63,500

No rope Exploding Barbed Wire Match
Atsushi Onita v Masahiro Chono (double KO)

nWo Japan (Satoshi Kojima & Hiroyoshi Tenzan) def. Manabu Nakanishi & Yuji Nagata

Tatsuhito Takaiwa def. Minoru Tanaka

IWGP Junior Heavyweight Tag Team Championships
Jushin Thunder Liger & Great Sasuke def. Dr. Wagner Junior & Kendo Kashin

IWGP Junior Heavyweight Championship

Koji Kanemoto def. Shinjiro Otani

Kazuo Yamazaki & Kazayuki Fujita def. Alexander Otsuka & Yuki Ishikawa

IWGP Tag Team Championships
Kensuke Sasaki & Shiro Koshinaka def. Genichiro Tenryu & Tatsumi Fujinami

IWGP Heavyweight Championship
Keiji Muto def. Don Frye

New Japan had seen a sales peak in 1997, and an attendance peak in 1998. Mid 1999, the company was on the other side of that boom, but was still able to pull announced crowds north of 60,000 to the Tokyo Dome, and the company still carried itself with a degree of swagger.

As if to exemplify that, Masahiro Chono opened the Strong Style Symphony show by driving out to the stage in an armoured personnel carrier, before walking down the ramp chomping on a fat cigar, wearing a thick protective vest. This in contrast to his opponent for the evening, an Atsushi Onita smoking a trademark cigarette and clad in a thin white vest. Two vastly different approaches of going to war in NJPW's first explosive barbed wire match.

With Onita a defiant freelancer who was wrestling sporadically with WAR at the time, a WAR referee joined Tiger Hattori in officiating the match. Chono was between allegiances as well; returning to the ring in March, he instantly started feuding with Keiji Muto and his version of nWo Japan. Chono began teaming with Akira Nogami (now known simply as AKIRA) who was making his own return from an eye injury as Team 2000, and Chono began actively recruiting members.

Onita would be affiliated with the Team 2000 stable after earning Chono's respect in the ring, Onita thanking Chono for stepping into his specialty match. The result, a double knockout, came after a visual spectacle, but a match of very little substance. As with most of the explosive deathmatches of the era, it involved teases of hitting the ropes (after a two minute grace period before the 'electric current' was switched on, an element built into the match seemingly just for the camp value of sirens and police lights accompanying the event) before both tasted the exploding barbs (Chono's choice of clothing would leave him singed but unmarked, while Onita bled heavily from the

arm). Chono would place Onita's jacket over him in a show of respect as he struggled out of the arena, but truthfully detested the gimmick match and participated reluctantly. When Onita's run in New Japan eventually culminated in Choshu's return to the ring for another barbed wire match in 2000, Chono would comment to press 'that crap has no place in wrestling'.[61]

Chono would also recruit Don Frye to Team 2000 by the end of the night. With barely 30 matches in New Japan to his name, Frye challenged Keiji Muto for the IWGP title after a run of singles victories in the prior month, including over Tatsumi Fujinami. Frye was amassing a perfect storm of heat from the audience. His relative inexperience and hotshot appearance in the main event, his outsider status from the world of MMA, his assaults on Muto after the bell in other matches, and an impressive menacing charisma all added up. On Frye's walk down the long Tokyo Dome ramp, he was pelted with rubbish from the normally reserved audience, much as Onita had been back in January.

Muto meanwhile was seen as a protector of pro wrestling and NJPW despite his status as nWo leader. Mangling the English language somewhat, he'd admit in interviews that Frye was impressive as an 'Ultimate champion' but that he'd show himself to be 'even more Ultimate than (Frye)'. Frenzied early activity after the opening bell, with a pair of Shining Wizards and a moonsault by Muto would lead into Frye taking control on the mat. Muto would eventually struggle free and clinch victory on Frye in the 12 minute and 21 second main event; if anyone felt short changed, it was worth noting that this was Frye's second longest match in his career to date, and only fifteen seconds shorter than his bout with Kazuo Yamazaki a year earlier.

Yamazaki was involved in an interpromotional matchup on the Symphony card, teaming with Kazuyuki Fujita against a pair of representatives from a company called Battlarts. Yuki Ishikawa had formed the promotion with the blessing of Yoshiaki Fujiwara, as his master's PWFG collapsed due to sponsors demanding radical shake ups in the face of struggling business. To give its full name, *Kakutou Tanteidan Battlarts* (Martial Arts Club Battlarts, often incorrectly translated as Martial Arts Detective Agency) was similar in presentation to PWFG and UWFi; it too sold itself on very physical and very real bouts leading to planned finishes. Yet with capable and acrobatic junior heavyweights, it had more of a pro wrestling leaning than its forebears, and quickly gained cult status. With Alexander Otsuka among its number, who was becoming a major MMA star in

PRIDE, Battlarts had been doing impressive business in 1998, even running Ryogoku Sumo Hall that November.

Here, the tag encounter was reasonably brief, and focused on continuing to establish Yamazaki and Fujita as martial artists on a level with Inoki's UFO crew. Fujita would dump Ishikawa directly on his head with a terrifying take down early in the match, before the Battlarts owner submitted to an armbar.

Strong Style Symphony had upstart promotions and upstart factions, then. As the sun was rising on Team 2000 though, a long running stable had faded away at the start of '99. Heisei Ishingun had been around for the best part of a decade, but with AKIRA leaving Shiro Koshinaka's stable for Chono's, and with the team struggling to stay relevant, Koshinaka disbanded the group in March. He'd quickly form a team with Kensuke Sasaki, stating his ambitions to do well with the former IWGP Champion and to eventually get one more career singles championship. Sasaki and Koshinaka quickly won the tag titles from Tenkoji, but would come up against Koshinaka's partner from just three months prior.

Genichiro Tenryu teamed with another veteran in Tatsumi Fujinami in a decent bout, but one whose decided highlights came when Tenryu and Sasaki locked horns. The heavyweight clash was clearly what the fans wanted to see as a singles feud, as the crowd was mostly silent before roaring at any sequence involving the pair.

The undisputed highlight of Strong Style Symphony from an in ring perspective saw Koji Kanemoto defending the IWGP Junior Heavyweight Championship against Shinjiro Otani. Kanemoto had beaten Jushin Thunder Liger the prior month to start his third title reign. The subsequent battle between often partners was a tremendous display, Otani constantly escaping Kanemoto's offense as he kicked out of one spiral bomb and landed a hurricanrana out of a second, only to fall to a Kanemoto moonsault.

The match was comfortably the most exciting element of a card that arguably signified a change in philosophy when it came to New Japan promoting the Dome. In prior years, with two shows at the building, or even when the Big Egg would only be run once, it was deemed each show needed something significant. Cross promotional battles, retirements, and dream matches were considered necessary promotional tools for the Dome over the last decade. Deathmatch opener notwithstanding, Strong Style Symphony was devoid of such

accoutrements. As three Tokyo Dome shows for New Japan became the norm over the next few years, there was a reliance on brand loyalty amassed during the boom period. Masahiro Chono’s entrance would become a symbol of hubris; New Japan wasn't as bulletproof as Chono’s armoured car.

All Japan Pro Wrestling
Giant Baba Retirement Show
May 2, 1999
Attendance 65,000

Naomichi Marufuji & Tsuyoshi Kikuchi def. Gran Naniwa & Makoto Hashi

Satoru Asako & Takeshi Morishima def. Burning (Kentaro Shiga & Yoshinobu Kanemaru)

Giant Kimala, Haruka Eigen & Jun Izumida def. Masao Inoue, Rusher Kimura & Mitsuo Momota

Johnny Smith, Masanobu Fuchi & Tamon Honda def. Fuyuki gun (Gedo, Koji Nakagawa & Yukihiro Kanemura)

Hayabusa, Great Sasuke & Tiger Mask vs Untouchables (Masahito Kakihara & Yoshinari Ogawa) & Maunakea Mossman (time limit draw)

(Giant Baba Retirement Match)
(Giant Baba & The Destroyer vs. Bruno Sammartino & Gene Kiniski)

Akira Taue, Stan Hansen & Steve Williams def. Gary Albright & No Fear (Yoshihiro Takayama & Takao Omori)

Toshiaki Kawada def. Hiroshi Hase

Johnny Ace & The Road Warriors (Road Warrior Hawk & Road Warrior Animal) def. Burning (Jun Akiyama & Kenta Kobashi) & Hakushi

Triple Crown Championship
Mitsuharu Misawa def. Vader

It wasn't a memorial show. That was the message All Japan wanted to convey most of all. This wasn't to be a commemoration of Shohei 'Giant' Baba's death, but a celebration of his career, headlined by the retirement match he didn't get to have while he was alive. Headlining his company's biggest show in absentia, the show was presented as if Baba hadn't passed: that he was still, up to the second of May 1999, active. Baba hadn't died, he couldn't.

Baba's increasingly restricted movement in his final matches was deemed by many to be a result of his huge frame, and his sexagenarian status. In truth, he was desperately ill, fighting a losing battle against colon cancer. On January 31 1999, just days after his 61st birthday, he was rushed to Tokyo University Hospital, where he died of liver failure as a result of the cancer.

On learning of his illness, Baba agreed with wife Motoko to keep his status a complete secret. Only an inner circle of five knew how life threatening his condition was; Motoko, their daughter and AJPW board member Sachiko, Baba's older sister, referee Kyohei Wada and Baba's personal secretary Ryu Nakata. His passing would catch most unawares, including officials Joe Higuchi and Jumbo Tsuruta (by this time fighting his own battle with cancer of the kidney) and Mitsuharu Misawa, who had graduated to booker and would assume the reins as president after Baba's death.[62]

Jinsei Shinzaki
As far as I was concerned at the time it felt like everyone was banding together after Baba passed. The boys, Misawa, the office was trying to make things work, to do their best and have it be as smooth a transition as possible. It worked for a few months, and I would do the Champion Carnival around then as well, but the next year, it all fell apart.

Before a formal wake on April 17th, and the Champion Carnival final that evening, All Japan hosted a fan event to give thanks to Baba,

which saw 28,000 at the Nippon Budokan leave flowers in the ring. With Baba having entered wrestling after a baseball career with the Yomiuri Giants, it was fitting that the Tokyo Dome would see the retirement bout cancer had denied the All Japan founder.

As the rest of the roster surrounded the ring, Gene Kiniski, Bruno Sammartino and the Destroyer lined up within it as video highlights of Baba with all three played on the big screen. His ‘opponents’ and partner then gave tearful tributes. Kiniski praised Baba as an athlete, sportsman and professional. Sammartino commented that Baba’s character was as giant as his body, while Destroyer thanked his former boss in Japanese. Baba’s famous 38.4 cm (US size 23) boots were placed center ring as a ten-bell salute played; afterward, Destroyer gripped the boots as if giving his boss one last handshake.

It was fitting that a show dedicated to saying goodbye to Baba would be opened by the man billed as his last pupil. Naomichi Marufuji had entered the All Japan dojo on graduating from high school in 1998, and while Baba didn't have a real hand in his training (Baba’s last true student was Jun Akiyama) his debut was the last under Baba’s purview. His wrestling education had come from Misawa, as had his gear; Marufuji, unprepared, didn't have ring wear made ready for his debut, meaning he started his career in the green short trunks that Misawa had lent him.

Still young and wiry, Marufuji was nonetheless acrobatic and shone in a largely comical opener, the jokes mostly coming courtesy of Gran Naniwa. Naniwa was the first of a number of Michinoku Pro wrestlers on the card, as Michinoku continued their spirit of cooperation with national promotions. His crab walking maneuvers drew laughs, while Tsuyoshi Kikuchi’s devastating skull on skull headbutt to Makoto Hashi, amplified by the house mic no less, caused cringes.

The highlight of the Michinoku Pro and All Japan cross promotion on the show was a six-man tag with some New Japan connections. The Great Sasuke captained his side, and came to the ring with an IWGP Junior Heavyweight tag belt freshly won at Strong Style Symphony with Liger. His MPro partner was the fourth iteration of Tiger Mask. Unlike Koji Kanemoto and Misawa before him, Yoshihiro Yamazaki had been a student of original Tiger Mask Satoru Sayama. Sayama bestowed the mask upon Yamazaki on his 1995 debut for Michinoku Pro; Yamazaki would remain in the promotion before the Tiger Mask character returned to New Japan in 2002.

The pair were joined by FMW's Hayabusa, FMW continuing a relationship with All Japan that also saw a Fuyuki Gun team lose on the undercard (including Gedo without his regular tag partner, Jado being injured on an FMW card the prior November). It was a junior all-star team, facing Maunakea Mossman and the Untouchable tag team of Yoshinari Ogawa and UWFi alum Masahito Kakihara. The All Japan junior heavyweight champion was experiencing a surge in popularity, helped by being aligned by Misawa at the time. Every time Ogawa stepped in the ring, the crowd took notice, anticipating some potential dream title defences that unfortunately would never take place. The All Japan trio would try to ground the outsiders, who replied by taking to the air. Hayabusa in particular was highlighted, but his moonsault and Firebird Splashes were broken up until the match hit its 30-minute draw.

Michinoku Pro also found representation in the semi main event. Jinsei Shinzaki reprised his Hakushi role, opposite Johnny Ace and the Road Warriors, making a one off All Japan appearance and their first in over a decade. Ace had brought in the Road Warriors to combat his former partner in Kenta Kobashi; Kobashi broke off his GET team with Ace after winning the Triple Crown the prior summer. Citing the need to begin a 'new era', he founded Burning with Jun Akiyama; the pair would go on to dominate the tag team division in All Japan.

It made sense, then, that Hakushi would be the fall boy for a team with the established former champion and the young, hot Akiyama. In the rarest of occurrences, Akiyama would even be able to knock both Warriors down for extended periods of time. While Shinzaki would manage his trademark offense though, he would fall to a huge Ace Crusher assisted by both Road Warriors, and followed up by a Doomsday Device.

With Baba being the primary focus of the show, much of the card was taken up by tag matches that maintained rather than advanced programs. The two exceptions involved the age-old friends and rivals of Misawa and Toshiaki Kawada. Kawada defeated Hiroshi Hase in a dramatic return match with an emphatic brain buster. Kawada had a tough start to the year; a main event against Misawa that January had seen him win his third Triple Crown at the expense of his arm. Kawada broke his arm midway through the match, but incredibly not only finished the main event, but did so with his trademark offense. This included a powerbomb he had no business performing; losing his grip he dropped Misawa on his head. The move would go down in Japanese history as the *Suicho Rakka* (vertical drop) power bomb, or

the Triple Crown Bomb, but would be adopted by English speaking fans as the *Ganso* Bomb (*Ganso* meaning 'originator' presumably because it evoked Lou Thesz's reverse slam).

Kawada had to vacate the Triple Crown, which would be won by Vader when he beat Akira Taue two months later. Vader would lose the title in his first defense against Misawa here, but looked as impressive as at any point in his career prior opposite the former Tiger Mask.

Vader was relentless with brutal suplexes to Misawa, and a powerbomb and splash on the floor outside of the ring. Dominating over half the match, Vader was a monster opposite Misawa, who eventually replied with a frenzied offense. Throwing his body at Vader, Misawa used forearm blows and splashes to Vader inside the ring and out, before a running elbow clinched his third title reign.

Closing the show, Misawa stated 'Tonight, Baba retired. He may be gone, but to me, he'll always be the boss.' The crowd responded with a chant of *'Zen Ni-hon'* in honour of the promotion before yelling Misawa's name. Misawa's speech hid an ominous subtext however, the route of which would drastically change AJPW's path.

New Japan Pro Wrestling
NJPW Final Dome '99
October 11, 1999
Attendance 58,500

Hiroyoshi Tenzan def. Tatsutoshi Goto

Kazuyuki Fujita def. Sean McCully

IWGP Junior Heavyweight Tag Team Championships
Shinjiro Otani & Tatsuhito Takaiwa def. Koji Kanemoto & Minoru Tanaka

IWGP Junior Heavyweight Championship
Jushin Thunder Liger def. Kendo Kashin

Shiro Koshinaka & Tatsumi Fujinami def. Osamu Kido & Takashi Iizuka

Kimo def. Yuji Nagata

Team 2000 (Don Frye & Masahiro Chono) def. nWo Japan (Satoshi Kojima & Scott Norton)

Genichiro Tenryu def. Kensuke Sasaki

IWGP Heavyweight Championship
Keiji Muto def. Manabu Nakanishi

NWA World Heavyweight Championship
Naoya Ogawa def. Shinya Hashimoto

January 4 had served as a figurative season closer for New Japan for several years. With the calendar rolling into a new millennium though, January 4, 2000 was to feel like a new leaf in company history. That meant October 11 1999 saw the conclusion to a lot of programs; while some big shows remained in 1999, this show was to mark the end of NJPW's decade in the Dome, and the end of 1999 as far as most of its major players were concerned.

The biggest loose end waiting to be tied was Shinya Hashimoto and Naoya Ogawa. UFO had seen a dire year and was effectively a non-factor at the end of 1999. Despite the January 4 incident between Ogawa and Hashimoto being designed to drive attention toward the promotion, their March 14 Yokohama Arena show had been a disaster. 8000 was the announced crowd in a building that could comfortably sit more than double that; a dismayed Inoki admitted 'even though everybody knew, they didn't come'[63].

The main event of that show saw Ogawa defeat Dan Severn for the NWA world heavyweight championship. Many at the time were confused as to just why Inoki partnered with the NWA; their pro wrestling history was divorced from Inoki's MMA vision, and the once proud global standard bearer in the industry had by now faded significantly. Ogawa would state in his post-match press conference that he wanted to break away from the traditions attached to the title and have it be defended as an MMA style pro wrestling belt (the NWA had stipulated the Ogawa Severn match would be contested under NWA rules with no punches, hamstringing the style of both involved).

To the magazine headline writers, the NWA title had become the NWF Championship by another name; NWF being the promotion and trademark Inoki had used for the main title in NJPW before creating the IWGP. Indeed, the NWF branding would return to New Japan in 2002, but in the meantime, the NWA championship was about to be defended in an NJPW ring for the first time in over six years.

Final Dome was billed as a last chance for Hashimoto against Ogawa and had the added narrative of Inoki representing UFO against Tatsumi Fujinami as the recently installed president of New Japan. Inoki was the guest ring announcer, while Fujinami would referee. A red-hot crowd came to their feet for Hashimoto unleashing frustration pent up since January, standing from an Ogawa mount and repeatedly suplexing the champion. Ogawa would take over though. For half the match he would deliver STOs and strikes to Hashimoto who

repeatedly stood up and tried to get back into the match. Fujinami eventually called for the bell, this time for a planned stoppage in Ogawa's favour.

As Hashimoto said he would take one more chance even while admitting he didn't deserve one, Inoki would criticise Fujinami for stopping the match too early. Inoki declared he was in favour of letting fighters fight, furthering the story of NJPW versus Inoki-ism to come. Hashimoto meanwhile would again take time away until the next Tokyo Dome show, nursing injuries and dealing with more behind the scenes struggles with management that would come to a head in 2000.

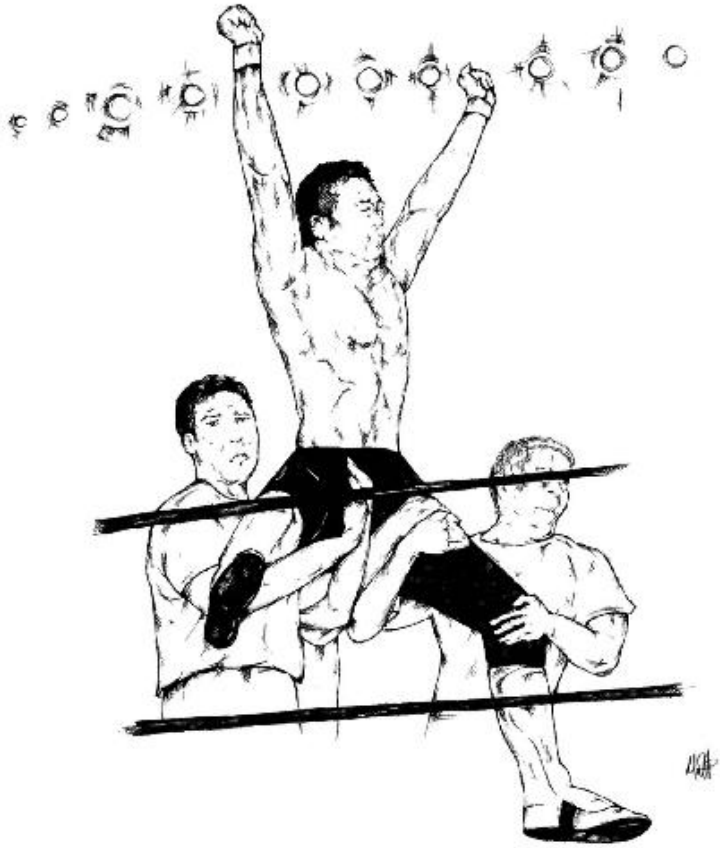
Manabu Nakanishi's 1999 journey reached its culmination at Final Dome. From super rookie to years of mid card toil, the long haired giant clinched victory in the G1 Climax over Keiji Muto in the final, leading to a title match in front of the Tokyo Dome crowd. Nakanishi was limited offensively but incredibly popular, his win in the summer being an upset to many and a cause to rally behind the big man. The match was structured around Nakanishi constantly hoisting Muto for his Argentine Backbreaker, and the IWGP champion escaping to work over Nakanishi's knee and arm. On the sixth time of asking, Muto again wriggled free of Nakanishi's grasp and cinched in an arm triangle for the submission win.

The crowd had made it clear in the spring during their tag affair that Kensuke Sasaki and Genichiro Tenryu one on one was what they really wanted to see. Final Dome didn't disappoint, Sasaki charging at Tenryu during introductions, and mat work quickly breaking down to physical brawling. The pair exchanged forearms and Tenryu's signature punches, before Sasaki stunned the audience with a huge plancha to the veteran. Tenryu would kick out of a Sasaki Northern Lights Bomb before hitting the former IWGP champion low and using Sasaki's own signature move against him. It was a wild match, and one that demanded a sequel.

Just over a year after its inception, the IWGP Junior tag division had become a focal point for athletic, physical matches that wowed audiences. Koji Kanemoto and Shinjiro Otani spun their spring battles over the singles junior title into the tag division. Kanemoto recognised the heart of 26-year-old Minoru Tanaka in singles battles with Otani and Tatsuhito Takaiwa, and recruited him as his partner, leading to bad blood with his former ally.

While Tanaka and Takaiwa played supporting roles well, Otani and Kanemoto were electric together in the tag title match. The pair radiated contempt for one another and the Tokyo Dome crowd was wholly invested in their personal conflict. Takaiwa would strike Kanemoto with a triple powerbomb after Otani hit a top rope dropkick, and then an Otani spiral bomb allowed the champions to retain.

A negative effect of the hot Junior tag division was a sense that junior heavyweights were spread too thin. Kendo Kashin tried hard as a masked heel champion, but struggled to really connect, and there was a feeling that the junior boom of a few years before was over. Jushin Liger went into his challenge with Kashin claiming that the juniors had ‘lost their bloodthirstiness’ and vowed to take the title abroad with him to find international challengers should he win. Liger’s victory at Final Dome would be the genesis of a new direction for him in the new millennium. Indeed, for New Japan and the Japanese wrestling space at large, for better or worse, it was all change.



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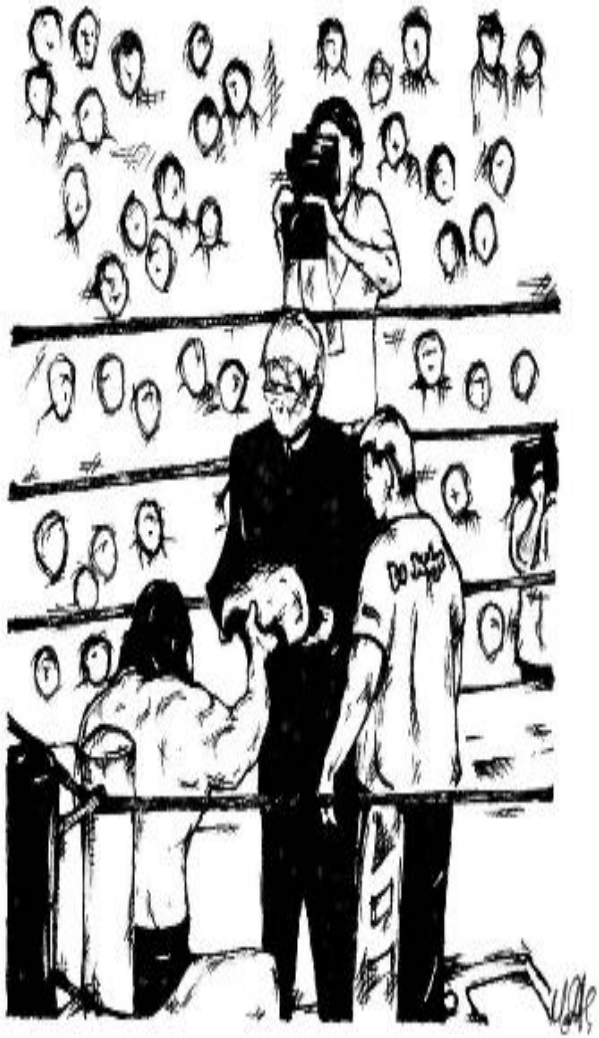


New Japan Pro Wrestling
NJPW Wrestling World 2000
January 4, 2000
Attendance 63,500

IWGP Junior Heavyweight Tag Team Championships
Shinjiro Otani & Tatsuhito Takaiwa def. Kendo Kashin & Minoru Tanaka

Shiro Koshinaka def. Satoshi Kojima

Hiroyoshi Tenzan def. Wild Pegasus

IWGP Junior Heavyweight Championship
Jushin Thunder Liger def. Koji Kanemoto

Manabu Nakanishi def. Kenzo Suzuki

Kazuo Yamazaki Retirement Match
Yuji Nagata def. Kazuo Yamazaki

Kimo def. Kazayuki Fujita

Scott Norton def. Don Frye

Rick Steiner def. Randy Savage
Shinya Hashimoto & Takashi Iizuka def. Kazunari Murakami & Naoya Ogawa

Masahiro Chono def. Keiji Muto

IWGP Heavyweight Championship
Kensuke Sasaki def. Genichiro Tenryu

Less than three months after their last appearance in the building, New Japan returned with a show that made some significant statements about their future. In fact, with an increasingly complicated power structure that saw Tatsumi Fujinami, Riki Choshu, Seiji Sakaguchi, Antonio Inoki and more besides with seats at the table, the statements sent were numerous and talking over one another. For the 21st century, this would be a New Japan where:

WCW was no longer.

The partnership between NJPW and World Championship Wrestling had been beneficial for both parties through the 1990s. It allowed western junior heavyweights like Chris Benoit and Eddy Guerrero to blossom as talents and gain mainstream success at home, and it gained NJPW its biggest merchandise revenue earner in history with nWo Japan. Yet the promotion began to implode in 1999, and in early 2000 was on the brink of self-destruction. Bizarre creative choices and poor management in the face of prosperous competition from the WWF would see live gates and television and pay per view audiences dwindle to near nothing as the year went on.

January 4, 2000 was in many regards a last hurrah for the WCW and NJPW relationship, with WCW stars in multiple featured Dome matches for the first time in a while. Chief among these inclusions was to be Bill Goldberg. As one of precious few big drawing and entirely home-grown WCW talents in recent years, Goldberg was put front and center in publicity for the show and given a featured spot on posters and advertising. With Goldberg placed opposite Manabu Nakanishi, New Japan fans would have been hooked on the premise of two prominent power wrestlers, even ignoring the attraction of having one of America’s biggest stars in his Japanese debut.

Unfortunately, it wasn't to be. On an episode of Nitro a mere 12 days before the show, Goldberg was involved in a segment where he would destroy the nWo’s limousine with his bare hands. Getting carried away, and forgetting his fists were taped but his arms were unprotected, he broke a glass window with his forearm and was immediately gushing blood. The injury to his arm necessitated a six-month absence, and a significant attraction to be missing from New

Japan's card.

In Goldberg's place, Randy Savage was brought in, positioned in a filler spot with Rick Steiner. Fans, already disappointed by the substitution, were not made any happier by a bout between two foreigners that were themselves working through several injuries. It was to Savage's credit as a performer that he recognized a need to engage with fans in a different way; as soon as the match started he addressed Masa Saito, who was commentating at ringside. Savage would constantly direct looks at Saito through the match as commentary discussed Saito's influence as a liaison between east and west in the 1980s and 90s. After Steiner won a flat match with a bulldog, he held Savage at ringside for Saito to punch and at least put some smiles on faces.

Wrestling World 2000 would also see the final NJPW appearance for Chris Benoit. After a two-year absence, Benoit had reprised his Wild Pegasus role for one tour the prior autumn. Teaming with Dean Malenko, he was placed opposite junior heavyweight tag teams despite his decidedly heavyweight musculature. His match with Hiroyoshi Tenzan played this up; it was a story of Benoit out powering Tenzan, and Tenzan out flying Benoit. Ultimately Tenzan would use a top rope Frankensteiner and a diving headbutt to put Wild Pegasus away; days later Benoit, along with Malenko, Guerrero and Perry Saturn would jump to the WWF.

nWo Japan was no longer.

No WCW would mean no New World Order, though the stable wasn't much of a factor at the close of the last millennium anyway. Under Keiji Muto, the focus changed from the nWo Japan stable in general to the individuals within, and when Masahiro Chono returned, it was clear Team 2000 was to be the focal heel unit.

The 'Black Summit' match was effectively the last chapter in the nWo/ New Japan tale. Chono would suppress Muto for most of the match, slowing the pace to a crawl as he proved too familiar with Muto's offense for his dropkicks and Dragon Screws to be effective. After a brawl on the floor, Muto was able to gain control, but Chono would kick out of one moonsault and get his knees up on a second, leading to a cross legged STF and victory for Chono.

A month later, Chono would absorb all the nWo members bar Muto into Team 2000, and nWo Japan was no more. As WCW was

purchased by the WWF in 2001, so too was the New World Order property for wrestling purposes, though Chono himself would retain Japanese nWo rights for his clothing line.

There was a need for new stars.

Kazuo Yamazaki retired on January 4, 2000 after one last match with his student Yuji Nagata. The former NJPW Dojo graduate and UWF/ UWFi participant said in his final address to the crowd he had experienced hell in the wrestling business but had experienced heaven as well. 37 was a young age to be retiring, but Yamazaki was transitioning into a role as dojo coach and TV announcer, having realistically hit a career peak with a strong G1 Climax run in 1998.

Nagata was approaching his main event stride at this point, as were his contemporaries like Tenzan and Satoshi Kojima. Yet with Chono, Muto and Hashimoto at the top, and the third generation just behind, the company was lacking depth at the lower end of the card. Wataru Inoue, Katsuyori Shibata and Hiroshi Tanahashi were all earmarked for a bright future, but a bigger risk was being taken on Kenzo Suzuki.

Suzuki had arrived from high school and university rugby, with considerable height at 191cm, and a heavyweight physique to match. As fellow Young Lions developed physically and in ring, Suzuki was pushed hard by Riki Choshu as a super rookie. As such, he'd have his first match in a spot high up the Tokyo Dome card opposite Manabu Nakanishi. For Nakanishi it was quite the comedown from the planned Goldberg match, and for Suzuki it was a lot to happen too soon. Nakanishi would bloody Suzuki’s nose before winning with an Argentine backbreaker; Suzuki would go on to become Tokyo Sports’ rookie of the year before his path eventually took him to America.

Junior heavyweights were passed over.

The New Japan roster of 2000 was starved of junior heavyweights. Contrasted to the melting pot of styles and wrestlers that existed earlier in the 90s, and even allowing for the power of Tatsuhito Takaiwa and the good looks and technical ability of Minoru Tanaka, things felt bare in the division. After interviews decrying a lukewarm division in the autumn, Liger returned from American excursion in a black body suit to replace his traditional red and white. He'd defend his junior title against Koji Kanemoto in under four minutes, making a strong declaration that he wanted to move up to the heavyweight division. ‘The junior division was just so flat at the time,’ Liger would

recall. ‘the (Kanemoto) match was really with that 1980s Inoki-like killer edge in mind. That was sorely missing… I’d wanted to try more heavyweight matches ever since my (1994) match with Hashimoto. Maybe I'd be at a disadvantage, but I wanted to try, and show I wasn't to be messed with’.[64]

The question remained what would happen to the division as Liger ‘graduated’ from it, and in the coming years it would primarily be foreign talent that would rebuild the division as homegrown juniors would be few and far between.

Fighters became wrestlers, and wrestlers became fighters.

Wrestling World 2000 saw the best and the worst of contemporary Inoki-ism in New Japan. On the high end was Shinya Hashimoto’s quest for redemption against Naoya Ogawa. It seemed the feud had been laid to rest after the prior October’s stoppage, but Hashimoto was on a quest for one last singles match against Ogawa and had to defeat his rival in a tag match to do it. Hashimoto would select Takashi Iizuka as his partner in what was undoubtedly Iizuka’s career highlight and highest billing. Ogawa meanwhile would select a fellow student of Inoki and Satoru Sayama in Kazunari Murakami. Murakami had been recruited by Inoki for UFO after a 1997 run in PRIDE; much like Ogawa he was young and brash with an easily hateable demeanor.

Murakami would quickly assault Iizuka in the hotly anticipated match, shoving officials aside much like Tiger Hattori was a year earlier, and landing heavy strikes to Iizuka who would roll to the outside. The bell was rung, and the Dome crowd poured boos on what seemed like an attempt to reconstruct the 1999 incident. As rubbish and rolls of toilet paper were hurled at the ring however, Fujinami and Inoki intervened and Inoki demanded a restart.

The crowd was red hot for the remainder of the bout, which eventually saw Iizuka choke out Murakami as Hashimoto was on top of an exchange on the floor. Another pull apart would ensue after the result, and a truly final singles match between Hashimoto and Ogawa would be set up, this time with Hashimoto’s career supposedly on the line.

Less successful on the show were Don Frye and Kazuyuki Fujita. While Ogawa had been an Inoki-ist success when it came to crowd volume if not raw size drawn, Frye and Fujita were a disaster as far as Wrestling

World 2000 was concerned. Fujita's MMA style positioning despite graduating from the New Japan Dojo, was met largely with silence. His match with Kimo Leopoldo, fresh from beating Yuji Nagata the prior autumn had that same silence, and then open hostility when it was stopped due to a knee below Kimo's belt.

Don Frye meanwhile was able to garner strong reactions from audiences in matches that favoured his cage-based background. In a brawl with Scott Norton, however, he was terrible. Norton was clearly in no mood to be thrown by Frye's suplexes, and the former UFC champion was extremely limited as far as other offense went. Ultimately Norton would pin Frye after a powerbomb, the ref counting to three and calling the match despite a clear kick out on Frye's part.

With all the micro narratives that played into NJPW's first show of the 2000s, it was easy to forget about a tremendous main event between Kensuke Sasaki and Genichiro Tenryu. Tenryu would parlay his October victory over Sasaki into an IWGP title challenge, and would win the title on December 10, adding extra stakes to the Tokyo Dome rematch four weeks away.

After their first match was a wild affair, Sasaki and Tenryu's second meeting was slower paced, but equally violent. There was a vindictive streak in Tenryu as he delivered his forearms and punches, seemingly calculated even in executing a higher risk Spider German suplex and top rope back elbow to Sasaki. Moments later though, a Tenryu frustrated at Sasaki's resilience would attempt a top rope Frankensteiner, and the 49-year-old would take a top rope powerbomb and two Northern Lights Bombs to give Sasaki his second IWGP reign. As major changes rocked the Japanese wrestling scene through 2000, Sasaki would have to deal with an even more intimidating foe in a dream match that autumn.

New Japan Pro Wrestling
NJPW Dome Impact
April 7, 2000
Attendance 60,000

Yuji Nagata def. Kendo Kashin

Manabu Nakanishi def. Scott Norton

Don Frye def. Koji Kanemoto

Hiroyoshi Tenzan def. Yutaka Yoshie

Satoshi Kojima def. Shinjiro Otani

Takashi Iizuka def. Kazunari Murakami

Masahiro Chono def. Keiji Muto

Kensuke Sasaki def. Jushin Thunder Liger

Naoya Ogawa def. Shinya Hashimoto

‘At 34, Shinya Hashimoto stands at a crossroads’. New Japan’s World Pro Wrestling TV show used a one-hour special documenting Hashimoto’s supposed final match. From driving to the venue, to his defeat by Naoya Ogawa, to press conferences officially announcing his ‘retirement’, Hashimoto had cameras following him for several days. The documentary closed on the single line of text above.

There was a good deal of subtext behind that closing caption. From a purely front-of-house perspective, it was, granted, true. After winning the tag bout on January 4, Hashimoto pledged to have one truly final match with Ogawa. On 11 March at the Rikidozan Memorial show, Ogawa and Hashimoto found themselves on the same side of a tag bout opposite Genichiro Tenryu and Big Bomb Jones, who had a forgettable WCW run as Ron Studd and then Reese. As the unsteady pairing fell apart, Hashimoto grabbed a microphone and promised a loss would lead to his retirement.

The retirement stipulation was pushed heavily as the draw of a show with a unique setup consisting entirely of singles matches. Even while none had titles at stake, the lure of Hashimoto either vanquishing Ogawa or retiring led to an announced crowd of 60,000; even with the promoter inflated number, it was a larger house than the prior autumn’s Final Dome.

The match went much the same way as at Final Dome however. After an initial flurry by Ogawa sent Hashimoto to the floor, the former IWGP champion reigned fury on the current NWA title holder. A DDT on the ramp was followed by another in ring, and a barrage of strikes. When Hashimoto took off his glove to deliver a knuckle to the eyebrow and a hard way cut to Ogawa, partner Kazunari Murakami ran in and was quickly tackled by a Takashi Iizuka who had beaten him earlier in the night.

It was for naught, however. As in October, Ogawa landed a succession of STOs to Hashimoto, leading to a referee stoppage. Hashimoto's career, it seemed, was over, and after refusing comment on the way out of the ring, he was pragmatic in interviews after the show, considering his next step. Indeed, at a crossroads.

The same could be said of Hashimoto behind the scenes. After taking protracted time off between bouts with Ogawa, Hashimoto was being phased out of the New Japan roster from January 1999. His retirement was never meant to last, but instead was to be the launching point for Hashimoto to be the face of a new NJPW brand.

As UFO faltered and then collapsed altogether, New Japan was to be the canvas for Antonio Inoki's vision of a pro wrestling and MMA hybrid. Meanwhile, WAR's collapse, and political turmoil in All Japan was seeing a flood of wrestlers in the free agency pool. Hashimoto's idea was to create a 'super indie' promotion of sorts under the New Japan banner, which would come to be called New Japan Pro Wrestling Zero. As fans demanded Hashimoto's comeback, sending origami cranes to the New Japan office in hopes he would renege on his retirement, plans were in place for Hashimoto to return in the autumn to set the stage for his new promotion.

Masahiro Chono and the Great Muta continued their long Tokyo Dome based rivalry at Impact, but this match too had an air of finality to it. While WCW's presence in New Japan was all but finished, Muta was preparing to spend the rest of 2000 in the dying promotion, while Chono sought to completely solidify Team 2000 as New Japan's lead faction. Chono would spray paint 'Team 2000' over the NJPW logo prior to a match that was full of stunts. Tables and chairs came out in some wild brawling, an interfering Tenzan would take a dropkick from Mona (a woman inexplicably cast as Muta's manager and who would later find fame in WWE as Molly Holly) and Chono and the referee would taste Muta's mist, the latter spraying leading to his DQ loss. It was the tale of Muta lacking what it took to lead ('he's not great, he's just Muta,' as Kojima remarked) and striking out to reinvent himself. It was a move met with skepticism, and not just because of the state of WCW at the time. 'Once upon a time, Muto was a major player in America,' wrote the ShuPro staff, 'now that's not at all the case. It's just a matter of whether he can come back with something different.'[65]

Muta and Chono were undoubtedly popular, but the final chapter of

the Ogawa Hashimoto saga was undisputedly the selling point for Dome Impact. Still, a solid undercard curio was found in the series of 'Challenge the Super Heavy' matches. After Jushin Liger's reinvention under the black bodysuit and his quick victory over Koji Kanemoto in January, he was presented as being too big for the junior heavyweight pond. Similarly decisive victories would follow against Minoru Tanaka, El Samurai and Shinjiro Otani, as Liger flirted with the heavyweight division, moves which would see him enter the G1 Climax in the summer.

Dome Impact's semi main event would see IWGP champions of each weight class clash as Liger took on Kensuke Sasaki. The match was clearly meant to evoke Liger's 1994 battle with Hashimoto though fell somewhat short. With much to prove and with a dastardlier persona, Liger would take any victory he could, delivering a brainbuster on the floor and waiting for a countout. Ultimately, despite two more brain busters in ring and some spirited shotei strikes, nothing was enough, and Sasaki pinned Liger in under eight minutes.

The quick and relatively easy manner in which Sasaki put Liger away took a considerable amount of wind from the junior legend's sails. The other weight class clashes all ended with heavyweights on top too, though in two cases with momentum gained by the loser. Kendo Kashin brought his mat-oriented style to Yuji Nagata in a rematch from Kashin's days as Tokimitsu Ishizawa. He would work Nagata's knees effectively before Nagata would force a submission with the Nagata Lock 2 crossface; Kashin's mat work would lead Nagata to recruit him into his new G-EGGS stable of MMA influenced wrestlers.

That stable would also include Yutaka Yoshie, the Animal Hamaguchi student, for now adopting a much more serious, if bizarre half shaven look than the pink singlet he'd later don. Yoshie lost to Hiroyoshi Tenzan in his first big match following eight months in Canada and had ground to make up moving on.

Back to the juniors, Shinjiro Otani would also leave his challenge match with higher stock. His losing effort with Satoshi Kojima was comfortably the highlight of the undercard, as Otani combined spectacle and precision; springboard dropkicking at Kojima's arm to eliminate his lariat, Otani looked to put the larger man away with a dragon suplex and had a memorable reaction of shock as Kojima kicked out. Kojima would pick up the win, but Otani looked great heading into Best of the Super Juniors a month later where he reached the final.

New Japan Pro Wrestling
NJPW Do Judge!!
October 9, 2000
Attendance 64,000

Shinya Hashimoto def. Tatsumi Fujinami

Jushin Thunder Liger def. Super Delfin

Don Frye def. Takashi Iizuka

IWGP Junior Heavyweight Championship
Tatsuhito Takaiwa def. Koji Kanemoto

IWGP Tag Team Championships
Team 2000 (Hiroyoshi Tenzan & Satoshi Kojima) def. G-EGGS (Manabu Nakanishi & Yuji Nagata)

Steve Williams def. Scott Norton

Team 2000 (Masahiro Chono & 'Mr.T') def. Masanobu Fuchi & Shiro Koshinaka

Toshiaki Kawada def. Kensuke Sasaki

In May 1999, while the company grieved its founder, All Japan Pro Wrestling staged the biggest event in its history. Barely a year later it seemed on the brink of death.

Mitsuharu Misawa had been kept in the dark when it came to the seriousness of Giant Baba's cancer; on his passing, Misawa suddenly found himself running the company. It must have felt like Baba was messing with his student from beyond the grave as the big man favored a sudden approach to delegation. On returning from Mexico, to play the second Tiger Mask, Baba had plopped a mask and cape on the table in front of him, with a grunted 'wear this'; when Misawa was given booking control of AJPW in 1997, it was with a gruff 'you- do it'. Now Misawa had the reigns of the whole company- up to a point.

Misawa was the new president while Giant Baba's wife Motoko remained owner of All Japan, and trouble was bound to ensue. Motoko was a divisive figure within the company, and somebody Misawa never got along with. For some, she was a necessary stabilizing figure ('she was a mother to me,' Kyohei Wada wrote. 'Her and Giant Baba were flip sides of the same coin. You have a babyface and a heel in wrestling, and theirs was the same relationship. She knew nobody could think ill of Baba and made him stronger by being tough')[66]. For others, including Misawa, she was needlessly obtrusive. Motoko would shoot down idea after idea by Misawa to modernize the company with regards to production, regarding big screens, stages and pyrotechnics as 'not All Japan like'.[67]

Misawa's clashes with Mrs. Baba were over cash as well as creative. When assuming control of the company, Misawa took closer looks at company finances and what he found boggled his mind. AJPW, consistently struggling to stay in the black even during prime earning years, was only able to exist on the strength of live gates. Ticket proceeds were the only source of income for the entire company. Merchandise, outside appearances by talent in other media, and licensing for toys and video games never produced funds for AJPW itself meanwhile, but instead one of four subsidiaries Motoko had set up; existing, Misawa accused, purely to line the Baba family coffers.[68]

Misawa would quickly find himself in an untenable position as president. When Jumbo Tsuruta, who had been an ally and go between with Motoko[69], died early in 2000 from complications after a kidney transplant, Misawa felt he had no choice. In June he announced plans to start a new company, one of the Four Kings of Heaven creating Pro Wrestling NOAH in reference to the Biblical Ark. While the exodus led by Genichiro Tenryu to SWS was damaging in 1990, this seemed near fatal. Misawa would take huge swathes of the roster and front office staff of All Japan; after the NOAH announcement, only six remained in the company. All Japan's PR agent, their ring announcer, Wada and Mrs. Baba stayed in the office, while Masanobu Fuchi and Toshiaki Kawada were the only contracted in ring talent remaining.[70]

Necessity spurred what remained of All Japan to rebuild bridges after Misawa burned his. Weak cards through July 2000 were bolstered by recruiting former WAR talent, in particular one Genichiro Tenryu, back in the fold after his and Baba's long war in the press over his SWS departure.

Then, just as the 'Berlin wall' between New and All Japan fell in 1990 as AJPW hosted the Wrestling Summit, so Fuchi walked out in Ryogoku on August 11 pledging to 'break down the walls that have long existed between us'. NJPW and AJPW would begin to cooperate starting with October's Do Judge, and a clash between the IWGP Champion and All Japan's de facto ace.

Toshiaki Kawada's decision to stay with All Japan was a strange one. Given how closely he was tied to Misawa throughout his life and career, a jump to NOAH would seem obvious. Instead, Misawa, who valued a genuine antagonism over friendship to motivate wrestlers to better performances,[71] kept his new company a secret from Kawada until its unveiling. Nevertheless, Kawada was ultimately appreciative of the decision 'We had been together through good and bad since high school,' Kawada would recall. 'He was one year my senior, so he always had that mindset of being the boss. (Separating) was something I knew he hated to do, but that I'd always wanted.'[72]

Kawada seemed to be Triple Crown champion elect with Kenta Kobashi's relinquishing of the belt to join NOAH. That Giant Baba had turned All Japan into a walled garden once more in the 90s after Wrestling Summit, and the philosophical differences between the two companies meant Kawada and Kensuke Sasaki's match had an intense

mystique to it.

While the match started with a clean lock up, things quickly grew more vicious, Sasaki landing a closed fist punch to the side of Kawada's head. Kawada would state afterward that the blow knocked him out briefly, and he was unable to remember much of the match, but nevertheless took control with a backdrop and stretch plum. Sasaki would fire back on Kawada, before ultimately a string of exchanged lariats turned into Kawada landing four successive enzuigiris to beat the IWGP champion.

With the interpromotional battle being a non-title match, Sasaki's belt was passed to him post-match. The champion would reject his title however, and step away without a word, only responding to press with 'a loss is a loss'. The IWGP title would be held up until NJPW next returned to the Tokyo Dome.

Underneath the main event were a pair of other interpromotional matches, though it's understandable Kawada and Sasaki took the headlines. Fuchi teamed with Shiro Koshinaka to take on Team 2000; Masahiro Chono had interrupted Fuchi's 'wall breaking' promo from August leading to the tag team encounter. From the Heisei Ishingun period on, Koshinaka was easily slotted in to any interpromotional affair as someone without a character allegiance to any particular company. Chono meanwhile, wasn't impressed, teasing a mystery partner named Mr. T for Do Judge and suggesting it could be anybody, or nobody at all given the ease with which he could beat his All Japan opposition.

Mr. T sadly was not the former B.A. Baraccus with experience as Hulk Hogan's partner, but instead Tatsutoshi Goto. Goto donned a Strong Machine style mask and entered to Junji Hirata's music, in order to set up a feud with Hirata reprising his old character.

The match itself was entirely forgettable. Scott Norton and Dr. Death fared somewhat better on paper at least; Steve Williams making his first New Japan appearance in ten years opposite Norton was billed as a battle of the strongest foreigners in their respective companies. The aim was to generate some of the same buzz as Vader had with Stan Hansen a decade prior; in practice it fell somewhat short. The fans were invested, and Williams fast and explosive, popping up from a series of Norton lariats and hitting a spectacular tope to the former nWo member. Norton was much more limited than his early 90s heyday however, and the Doctor Bomb and backdrop suplex that

finished the match lacked intensity as Williams struggled with a less mobile opponent.

The biggest matches bookended Do Judge, as the show opened with the return of Shinya Hashimoto. It was a struggle between the ousted wrestler and upper management, operating on several levels. In ring, it was the result of Tatsumi Fujinami demanding that should Hashimoto return, it be against him, and that Hashimoto should start again, like a Young Lion in the opening bout, with simple black tights to boot. While Hashimoto would wear his regular gear to take on Fujinami, he certainly proved his worth to the New Japan president, beating him with a DDT and Kimura, and then embracing his boss.

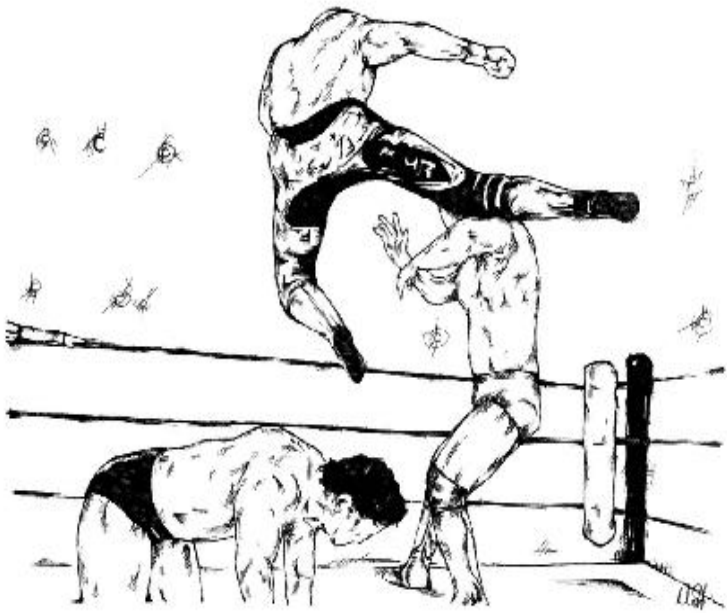
There was more to the story, however. Hashimoto was increasingly frustrated with the power structure within New Japan, particularly when it came to getting his ideas for Pro Wrestling Zero implemented. With Fujinami, Riki Choshu, Seiji Sakaguchi and to an extent Antonio Inoki all having varying degrees of say into the in-ring product, it was hard to get things into motion, especially with Fujinami as president. 'He was indecisive,' Jushin Liger would recall. 'Lots of people didn't like Riki Choshu because he was very impulsive, but he'd have a firm idea of "this is what we're doing, deal with it". Fujinami would be very democratic, meet with everyone, take everyone's views, then disappear into his office and you wouldn't hear from him.'[73]

Fujinami for his part admitted struggling with his role as president and cited being too stressed to focus on working out for his match at Do Judge, quickly appearing worn out against Hashimoto. The president had proposed a tag match instead of the singles affair, but Hashimoto was insistent on it being a singles match.[74]

It was a battle of Hashimoto fighting to be accepted back into the fold in the front of house, but frustrated at movement behind the scenes. Choshu was a particular stumbling block to Zero, having been consistently opposed to the idea of a sub-brand. When a frustrated Hashimoto struck out on his own, taking bookings and making connections with Misawa and NOAH, Choshu was incensed. He'd been a bridge between New and All Japan and played a significant role in facilitating Fuchi and Kawada's appearance; Hashimoto's dalliances with the man who decimated the AJPW roster were unforgivable, and Fujinami agreed. 'This was supposed to be his promotion within New Japan, but he went and created his own relationships outside of the company.'[75]

NJPW Zero would be announced to fans and press in October, but by the end of November, it was killed. Hashimoto was out of NJPW, and his project would become an entirely separate company in Pro Wrestling Zero-One; though not before an emotionally charged match with Choshu himself in January.

2001



New Japan Pro Wrestling
NJPW Wrestling World 2001
January 4, 2001
Attendance: 62,000

IWGP Heavyweight Championship Tournament
Kensuke Sasaki def. Satoshi Kojima

IWGP Heavyweight Championship Tournament
Hiroyoshi Tenzan def. Yuji Nagata

Junior Stars (Koji Kanemoto & Minoru Tanaka) def. Shinya Makabe & Tatsuhito Takaiwa

Takashi Iizuka def. Kendo Kashin

IWGP Heavyweight Championship Tournament
Kensuke Sasaki def. Masahiro Chono

IWGP Heavyweight Championship Tournament
Toshiaki Kawada def. Hiroyoshi Tenzan

Keiji Muto & Shinjiro Otani def. Jushin Thunder Liger & Manabu Nakanishi

Riki Choshu vs Shinya Hashimoto - No contest

IWGP Heavyweight Championship
Kensuke Sasaki def. Toshiaki Kawada

Wrestling World 2001 returned New Japan to the tradition of using January 4 as a proverbial season closer, wrapping 2000's programs before the year began in earnest. Indeed, the show was almost a direct sequel to Do Judge, continuing its major talking points of the IWGP title and Shinya Hashimoto's relationship with New Japan.

Depending on who was speaking at the time, Hashimoto had either been fired in November 2000, or there was a mutual decision to part ways. With Hashimoto making stronger partnerships with outside promotions, the NJPW offshoot that Zero was supposed to be was now its own entity, Pro Wrestling Zero One. Hashimoto had the independence and autonomy he desired as promoter, but no protection in a crowded market that was seeing a lot of outside competition as PRIDE and K1 were eating into pro wrestling gates.

By Wrestling World, some relations had thawed between Hashimoto and at least some of the New Japan decision makers. He was a part of Inoki's New Year's Eve Bom-Ba-Ye show, which pit several NJPW wrestlers against fighters from PRIDE, and a match with Choshu was set up for the Tokyo Dome, to let Hashimoto fans see him redeemed against the man who supposedly fired him, and garner Zero One some publicity before their debut event in Ryogoku in March.

The bout was never promoted as a mat classic. One stunt that helped build to the match saw Choshu interrupt Hashimoto's press conference announcing the first Zero-One show; the ensuing dialogue was memorably ludicrous. More a battle of filthy tongues than of sharp ones, Japanese wrestling fans would call the meeting the '*kora kora* dialogue' due to the more than 20 utterances of the expletive in one minute.

The match itself had a similarly scrappy feel. Hashimoto wouldn't be drawn in at first, standing in the corner and then teasing leaving altogether as he headed to the apron. On finally entering though, Hashimoto reigned strikes down on Choshu. Choshu would send the record setting champion to the floor with a backdrop suplex, which would turn out to be the first of two wrestling moves in the match; after Hashimoto later hit a DDT, the match became a slugfest.

Hashimoto and Choshu exchanged strikes for five minutes, each knocking the other down but being unable to follow up. As kicks, chops and punches were exchanged with no indication of a change in pace, Tatsumi Fujinami hopped in the ring and waved off the match. Fujinami would tell the live crowd 'this isn't pro wrestling,' before explaining on commentary that he understood the fans would be upset but that both were focused on hurting one another and neither on the match itself.

Hashimoto was able to move on to Zero One without taking a loss, but the finish was a poor attempt at catching the controversy of the Ogawa incident from two years prior. Hashimoto and Choshu for their part would continue their feud for years through snippy media comments, eventually culminating in Zero-One working together with Choshu's World Pro Wrestling in 2003. ('The Riki Choshu who brought the Three Musketeers to prominence is dead, I don't know who this guy is,'[76] remarked Hashimoto before the interpromotional program, to which Choshu responded with a rapier sharp 'who are you calling dead, you fat piece of shit?'[77]. By the time Zero-One officially launched meanwhile, relations were cordial enough for NJPW to lend Yuji Nagata for the promotion's debut main event despite Shinjiro Otani also defecting to Hashimoto's promotion in time for launch.

As for Otani himself, he was featured fairly strongly in the early part of 2001. Before his jump to Zero-One, he'd unsuccessfully challenge for the IWGP heavyweight championship after spending his entire

career as a junior. At Wrestling World, he'd team up with Keiji Muto, who was making his return from America with a shaved head and a new direction in the form of the All Japan partnership; by the end of the year he would be a Triple Crown and tag team champion in the company, before 2002 saw his promotional allegiance change completely.

While Hashimoto and Choshu attempted to recreate 1999 in the semi-main event, the main event echoed 1989. Just as in the Tokyo Dome's first event, the IWGP Heavyweight Championship was vacant, with a new champion decided in a one-night tournament. After Sasaki surrendered the belt following his defeat at the hands of Toshiaki Kawada, it would make sense that the January 4 tournament would boil down to the New and All Japan representatives.

So much so, in fact, that the crowd was quiet for the other four men in the tournament, so secure they were in the knowledge of what the final would be. Hiroyoshi Tenzan and Yuji Nagata had a tough time in the second match of the show. Tenzan had been handed leadership of Team 2000 by Masahiro Chono as he was more devoted to driving All Japan away from the company, and Nagata had seen his G-EGGS stable grow under his leadership throughout 2000. The fans were lukewarm as each low blowed the other as they got into submission holds, but woke up as Tenzan delivered a frightening variation of his Tombstone piledriver, and then a moonsault to advance.

The fans would rally behind Sasaki in the other quarter final, however, and Satoshi Kojima seemed like a very real threat to the former champion. Kojima was entering his prime years at this point in his career, and was intense from the start, hitting a tope and inadvertently cutting himself above the left eye. As the match progressed, Kojima would work over the arm of Sasaki, causing him to struggle all night with the damage; Sasaki would then hit a Riki Choshu like lariat and a Northern Lights Bomb, before sending a message to Kawada by forcing Kojima to submit with a Boston Crab; the submission hold favoured by Young Lions used as a sign of Sasaki's dominance.

Sasaki's bad arm would naturally play heavily into his semifinal match with Masahiro Chono. With six tournament entrants, two byes were available, but noble as Sasaki was, he'd pass up his bye as a former champion. Kawada would take his chance to skip the first round however, and Chono would take Sasaki's free pass. Sasaki's injured limb meant a powerbomb turned into a devastating stump piledriver,

a reference perhaps to Kawada's Ganso Bomb against Misawa, before he submitted Chono and advanced.

Much as Kojima did his best to make fans doubt Sasaki, Tenzan brought fire to Kawada. An early headbutt to the All Japan star cut Tenzan's forehead the hard way, and he would go on to deliver a Tenzan Tombstone and a Mountain Bomb from the top rope. As Kawada had the tough time in the second round Sasaki had in the first, he eventually fired back with brutal boots to the face and a powerbomb to win.

So, naturally we were led to the Kawada and Sasaki rematch for the final. Kawada would dominate the early going before Sasaki would light his foe up with lariats before a huge German suplex and a Northern Lights Bomb. Sasaki's path to redemption was complete, and he was IWGP champion once more.

While the second Kawada and Sasaki wasn't quite to the high standard of their first meeting, the rematch still delivered and the crowd were hugely invested. It would be quite understandable to have had Kawada and Sasaki cemented as a main event from the outset, so much did the tournament preceding it seem like a formality; having the tournament take place over the course of the prior month would have added something to shows in November and December.

There was another factor, however, that would perhaps limit the roster available for Wrestling World and be an ominous portent of NJPW's early 21st century decline. A mere four nights prior, the Osaka Dome played host to Inoki Bom-Ba-Ye 2001. A partnership between Inoki and the Dream Stage Entertainment corporation that owned PRIDE FC, the show saw a wide range of the New Japan roster from Kendo Kashin to Keiji Muto take on PRIDE's fighters in MMA style pro wrestling matches.

With PRIDE cresting a wave of popularity, and New Japan and Inoki himself with a strong enough cache to make for a lot of curiosity, the event was a huge success. Osaka Dome wasn't sold out, but the announced crowd of 45,000 was strong with a good gate, and the event delivered high TV ratings. This was the successful version of the Inoki-ism vision that UFO wasn't. Bom-Ba-Ye would be a fixture for the next few New Year's Eve holidays, and it would have a distinct effect on the next few January 4 events.

All Japan Pro Wrestling
AJPW Oudou Shin Seiki (King's Road New Century) 2001
January 28 2001
Attendance: 58,700

Battle Royal
Dan Kroffat def. Darkness Dragon, Genki Horiguchi, Gran Naniwa, Nobukazu Hirai, Ryuji Hijikata, SHINOBI, Stalker Ichikawa, Suzenji, Susumu Mochizuki, TARU, Yasushi Kanda and Yuto Aijima

Kim Duk & Shigeo Okumura def. Nobutaka Araya & Yoshiaki Fujiwara

El Hijo Del Santo & Mil Mascaras def. Arkangel de la Muerte &

Blue Panther

Masahito Kakihara & Mitsuya Nagai def. Alexander Otsuka & Mohammed Yone

George Hines, Jim Steele & Johnny Smith def. Barry Windham, Curt Hennig & Mike Rotundo

Jushin Thunder Liger def. Masanobu Fuchi

Atsushi Onita & Terry Funk def. Abdullah the Butcher & Giant Kimala

Steve Williams def. Mike Barton

Keiji Muto def. Taiyo Kea

Kensuke Sasaki & Toshiaki Kawada def. Genichiro Tenryu & Hiroshi Hase

The All Japan of the 1990s had achieved most of its success while operating as a walled garden, rarely if ever allowing for cross promotion with other companies, or allowing its talents, whether homegrown or from abroad, to wrestle anywhere else.

In 2001, they didn't have this luxury. While the exodus of AJPW staff to SWS in 1990 only projected the company to new heights, Mitsuharu Misawa had effectively gutted the company in setting up NOAH. The new promotion would focus on mid-size buildings through its first year, with strong production in smaller venues rather than threadbare presentation in larger spaces. It worked well for the fledgling promotion, with its roster of top stars in their prime frequently filling Korakuen, and at their peak for the year in 2000, bringing in five figure announced crowds to the Ariake Coliseum.

All Japan's announced attendance was only marginally down through 2000, but there was no denying that the company was hurting, especially with limited exposure as NOAH took All Japan's already small TV spot on NTV (this despite NTV still holding a 15% share in AJPW at the time). *Zen Nihon Pro Wrestling Chuukei* (Broadcast) would be rebranded as *Coliseo,* with NTV envisaging it as primarily a NOAH broadcast with recaps of All Japan shows and other companies

alongside Misawa's promotion. Motoko Baba and Masanobu Fuchi despised the compromise and would forfeit their position on TV until severing lingering ties with the broadcaster. At least after their Dome show that is, which happened barely three weeks after NJPW's Wrestling World.

While the show was primarily promoted as King's Road New Century, it was also marketed as a memorial event for Giant Baba. The show would occur two years after Baba's passing, a significant step in the cultural grieving process in Japan (the first and second anniversaries of a death are marked with ceremonies and services, and special ceremonies don't occur again until the sixth year after a passing). Much as the Tokyo Dome played host to Baba's 'retirement' as having ties to his careers in wrestling and baseball, so too would the venue host a show marking the second anniversary of his death.

It would be natural then, to expect somewhat of a nostalgia driven show. The Baba 'retirement' show in 1999 obviously had a nostalgic bent as well, but also managed to shine a light on developing talent and sent fans home with a spectacular main event. The 25th anniversary Dome show a year prior was built around All Japan showing the best match available to them in the main event, in the form of Misawa and Kawada.

King's Road New Century's nostalgia felt somewhat empty, provided as it was by departed names making guest appearances, with the skeleton crew that remained in the company picking up the remaining slack. While All Japan's last two Dome shows were definitive statements about the promotion's potential present and future, here the main event felt more like a New Japan than an All Japan one.

Days after Kensuke Sasaki had vanquished Toshiaki Kawada, he would team with his rival to take on Genichiro Tenryu and Hiroshi Hase. While Hase had been attached to All Japan between political obligations for the last five years, and Tenryu had realigned with the company as WAR disappeared, both had a longer or more recent history with Sasaki and New Japan than Kawada and All.

As it happened, the match was the result of a lot of change and awkward compromise. With Tenryu having freshly taken over the Triple Crown Kenta Kobashi had vacated en route to NOAH, a Tenryu versus Kawada title match was the natural direction, and was actually announced, for that matter. With New Japan hosting their IWGP title tournament on January 4, the vision was for Kawada to win the New

Japan belt, and for the main event to be a double title match, which would have been an undeniable draw.

New Japan cooled on the idea however, and Sasaki would vanquish Kawada at Wrestling World. With a freshly beaten Kawada getting a title shot immediately afterward being seen as damaging to the Triple Crown, the main event was changed to an All versus New Japan tag match. Kawada would team with Tenryu to face the combination of Sasaki and Riki Choshu, before that too changed. Booking fell to Motoko Baba on the All Japan end, with Katsuji Nagashima on the New Japan front, and how the push and pull between the two companies led to the main event as shown was a mystery, even to those inside ('I had no hand in it,' Masanobu Fuchi would comment, 'even my match with Jushin Liger was lined up by Nagashima'). [78]Even Kawada and Sasaki themselves seemed to struggle with the concept of the new match, Kawada telling media the tag was because 'if the double title match isn't happening, we have to do something big or it's rude to the fans,' while Sasaki weakly stated Kawada was still his rival, but that anything can happen in pro wrestling.[79]

Tenryu would play heavily to his memorable series with Sasaki in ring, hitting a Northern Lights Bomb for a near fall, and while Kawada picked up the pin with a powerbomb to Hase, it was Sasaki closing the show. The IWGP Champion would call out to Tenryu and challenge him to take on Sasaki and Kawada again, though this was the last time the pair was together for a while.

For dyed in the wool All Japan fans, the semi main event may have only seemed marginally less insulting than the final match on paper; Keiji Muto playing the outsider against one of a precious few All Japan loyal foreign talents in Taiyo Kea. Unlike Sasaki though, Muto would stick around through 2001, and take a much bigger role as the political situation in New Japan worsened. For now, Muto would gradually build a stable of stars from both New and All Japan, retaining his alliance with Shinjiro Otani and adding Don Frye in NJPW, and Kea in AJPW to form BATT (amusingly, Bad Ass Translate Trading).

With a heavily New Japan influenced top two matches, earlier bouts played more to AJPW nostalgia. Terry Funk and Atsushi Onita teamed up against Abdullah the Butcher and Giant Kimala, an affair that, given the participants, unsurprisingly turned bloody. For Funk, this was his first All Japan match in nearly ten years; for Onita it was almost 17. Both would cut post-match promos to promote their history

with the company, Funk saying ‘All Japan is the best wrestling organization in the world and always will be,’ parlaying into occasional runs through the next couple of years, while Onita was more emotional.

Three years after his discussed return for the 25th anniversary show was nixed, Onita was in tears talking about his posthumous return to Giant Baba. Screaming in English that ‘this is our house,’ Onita went on to say that his style had changed drastically since the last time he was in AJPW, but that the sense of nostalgia was strong. ‘I loved Baba, Terry loved Baba, we all loved Baba and that's why we came back,’ Onita went on to say, before declaring ‘I took a different road, so did Funk, so did Hansen, but that's human. We came back and that's what matters.’ Onita didn't stay back, however, and wouldn't wrestle for the company again until 2014.

Mil Mascaras also returned to All Japan on the show after a fifteen-year absence. The iconic 58-year-old luchador was limited in a tag match that really let the younger El Hijo Del Santo and Blue Panther shine, but the crowd recognised his influence in the company through the 1980s, reacting well to his eventual win, and post-match handshake with long term rival The Destroyer Dick Beyer.

Promotionally though, Stan Hansen’s retirement was given highest billing, the Texan sharing poster space with Giant Baba as matches themselves were touted in small print. At 51, Hansen had still been working long tours through to the year 2000 for AJPW, but was facing increasing trouble with lower back pain. As his lumbago worsened, Hansen wrestled his last matches in October of that year. On the 21st of that month, he was beaten by Tenryu in the semifinals of the tournament to fill the vacated Triple Crown Championship (‘I was knocked out in that match,’ Hansen recalled ‘and didn't remember anything until I made it to the back. It was the first time that had happened to me. I took it as a sign from God that I had to stop’) [80]and was on the losing end of a six man tag a week later.

Hansen’s retirement ceremony was brief, a collection of career highlights followed by a speech thanking Baba, All Japan and the fans. It was the end of a truly historic career for a man who left a significant mark as a foreigner on the Japanese wrestling landscape. Nevertheless, the ceremony was indicative of a show riddled with 1970s and ‘80s nostalgia, with the main event top acts coming from elsewhere. It played heavily to an aging audience, borne out by the live gate; while All Japan announced 58,700 fans through the doors,

much of the Dome sat empty, and later figures would suggest the actual figure was barely half that.

New Japan Pro Wrestling
NJPW Indicate of Next
October 8, 2001
Attendance: 61,500

El Samurai, Jushin Thunder Liger & Minoru Tanaka def. Team 2000 (AKIRA, Jado & Gedo)

Team 2000 (Giant Silva & Giant Singh) def. Hiroshi Tanahashi, Kenzo Suzuki, Wataru Inoue & Yutaka Yoshie

Gary Goodridge def. Michiyoshi Ohara

IWGP Junior Heavyweight Championship
Kendo Kashin def. Masayuki Naruse

Bob Backlund & Tatsumi Fujinami def. The Funks (Terry Funk & Dory Funk Junior)

Osamu Nishimura & Riki Choshu def. Tenkoji (Hiroyoshi Tenzan & Satoshi Kojima)

Manabu Nakanishi def. Tadao Yasuda

Kazayuki Fujita def. Kensuke Sasaki

Jun Akiyama & Yuji Nagata def. BATT (Hiroshi Hase & Keiji Muto)

A year is a very long time in professional wrestling. In 2001, there was an especially large number of moving parts. In autumn 2000, Shinya Hashimoto's desire to cooperate with Mitsuharu Misawa and Pro Wrestling NOAH would lead either to his dismissal or walkout from New Japan, depending on who you listened to. The collaboration was too damaging to New Japan's relationship with All Japan, coming as tensions between Misawa's fledgling company and AJPW were at their highest. One year later, and a New Japan and NOAH team would be taking on a New and All Japan combination in the main event of an NJPW show.

In fact, if anything, Hashimoto served indirectly as a diplomatic bridge between the three companies. Through the spring and into the summer, the freshly launched Zero-One engaged in an interpromotional feud with NOAH, starting with an inaugural Zero One main event of Hashimoto and Yuji Nagata against Mitsuharu Misawa and Jun Akiyama. Competition between New and All Japan through the 90s was still fresh in the minds of fans and talent, and the results were intense, with exactly the level of real hostility Misawa craved creatively. That competitive nature was especially evident with Akiyama and Nagata, who shared similar styles and college amateur backgrounds.[81]

Hashimoto may have been gone from New Japan, but had a through line to his fellow Musketeers, Masahiro Chono in particular. Chono

had joined what was now a creative committee in New Japan toward the end of 2000, in part due to dissatisfaction at Riki Choshu's direction, and to 'loosen his control' on the company.[82] A dialogue between New Japan and NOAH was set up to join the existing All Japan relationship then, with the end goal being a 2002 series between Chono and Misawa.

For now, however, a program would be established between Global Honoured Crown champion Akiyama and 2001 G1 Climax winner Nagata. Their BATT opponents in the reformed combination of now Triple Crown holder Keiji Muto and Hiroshi Hase managed to evoke memories of excellent early 1990s tags, and played into Akiyama's past with Hase, from university wrestling club to All Japan and the Dome itself. The match started slow, but built to a thrilling crescendo; Hase ducking a Nagata enzuigiri and Muto stepping off his back to hit a Shining Wizard being a memorable moment. After Nagata beat Hase with a backdrop suplex, he would address Akiyama, promising that they'd find out who the better man was sometime soon (as soon, in fact, as January 4).

The bottom of the card saw significant Tokyo Dome debuts. Jado and Gedo had been in the Tokyo Dome together before, as part of the WAR and UWFi program. Now though, they were officially under the New Japan umbrella, joining Team 2000 after being broadly experienced freelancers through the 1990s. Gedo would announce a 'big surprise' to open the show, bringing out Koji Kanemoto to join Team 2000 and draw the ire of former partner Minoru Tanaka and Jushin Thunder Liger (who, for the present, was back in the red and white after his flirtation with the heavyweights). Kanemoto wouldn't factor into Tanaka's cross arm breaker win, but a collision course was set with Tanaka.

Team 2000 had also recruited a pair of huge foreign talents by October 2001. Paolo Cesar 'Giant' Silva had wrestled briefly for the WWF through 1998 and 1999 before being let go by the company. Dalip 'Giant' Singh Rana meanwhile had a bizarre route through training in the Punjabi police force before migrating to America, briefly being signed to WCW before their closure, and getting an offer to team with Silva.

Indicate of Next would see the Giants take on a group of Young Lions in a handicap match designed to hide their limitations and show off their power. Silva would win with a simultaneous pin on Wataru Inoue and Hiroshi Tanahashi, the future Ace making an ignominious

Dome debut.

While Singh would gain more success wrestling in America, becoming a world champion in what was by then, WWE as the Great Khali, Silva remained in Japan until 2006, though not always in pro wrestling. Silva would transition into a career with PRIDE, becoming a novelty attraction with a poor career record.

This was the time of PRIDE, K-1 kickboxing, and the Japanese MMA boom being big business in Japan, and pro wrestling was in danger of being passed by. Under the spell of Inoki-ism however, there was less of an interest in a Baba like protection of pro wrestling as a medium in the face of other pursuits, and more chasing of a hybrid product that most fans were rejecting. New Japan stars were showing up at PRIDE events and being roundly beaten due to a lack of experience, as when Kendo Kashin was quickly dealt with by Ryan Gracie.

Meanwhile on the New Japan side, the experiment in MMA styled pro wrestling Inoki started with UFO was continuing. Kensuke Sasaki's momentum, earned from vanquishing Toshiaki Kawada in January, was squashed by an MMA styled feud with Kazayuki Fujita, who had put NJPW on hold to transition to PRIDE and K1. Tadao Yasuda, a former sumo wrestler turned fighter, was a questionable entry into the 2001 G1 Climax, yet would still gain a win over Manabu Nakanishi, the favour being returned at Indicate of Next to polite applause.

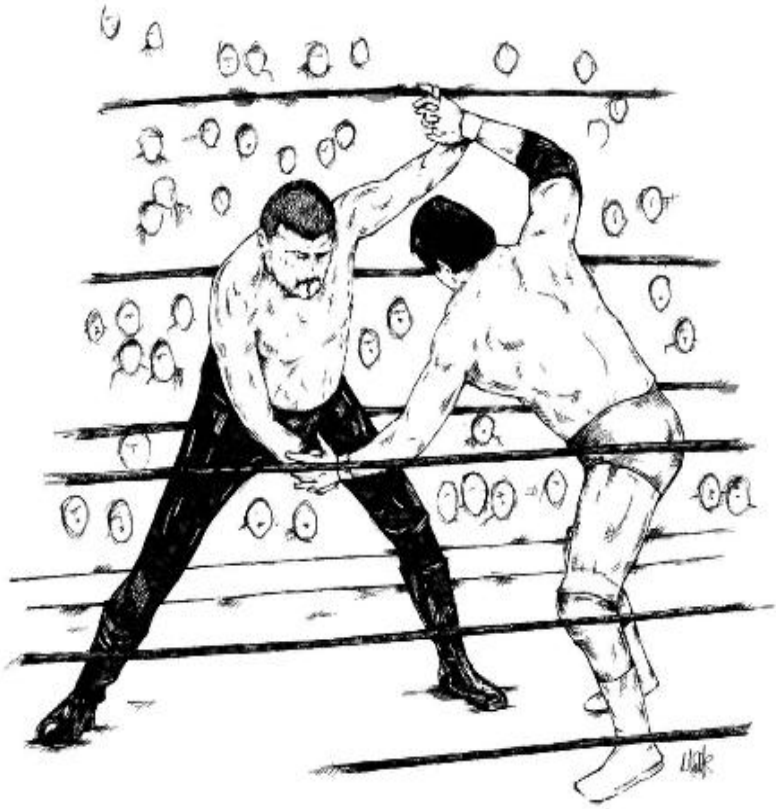
Masayuki Naruse meanwhile, formerly of RINGS would serve as the sparking point of a bizarre angle around Kendo Kashin. Kashin would wrestle under his real name of Tokimitsu Ishizawa, sans his normal mask, and clinch the IWGP Junior Heavyweight title in under thirty seconds with a cross armbreaker. Ishizawa would be presented the championship with a certificate read by Seiji Sakaguchi, but would throw down the belt and tear up the certificate. Moments later however, Ishizawa would head to the back under his Kashin hood and retrieve the championship as if nothing had gone wrong.

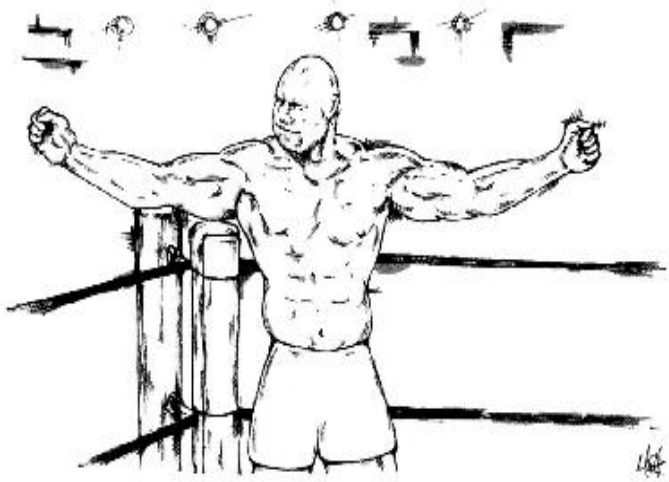
Ishizawa/Kashin's schizophrenic nature mirrored the feel of the product at large. For fans, MMA was an increasingly attractive prospect for their entertainment Yen. As the Japanese economy floundered, there wasn't enough of the pie to go around for separate combat sports. NJPW's approach of neither fish nor fowl when it came to MMA and pro wrestling was a turnoff to all but the loyalists. The pseudo 'shoot wrestling' approach to promotion had been successful largely to a cult of personality around its stars of Nobuhiko Takada,

Akira Maeda, Masakatsu Funaki, Minoru Suzuki and more recently Naoya Ogawa. Their ability to straddle both worlds meanwhile was helped largely by being trained for just such an eventuality, a far cry from fighters crudely slapped into featured New Japan matches.

Relationships were straining. The company was struggling to maintain its fans in the box office, and arguments were becoming heated in the boardroom. It felt that something was bound to give very soon.

2002





New Japan Pro Wrestling
NJPW Wrestling World 2002
January 4, 2002
Attendance: 51,500

Masahito Kakihara & Masayuki Naruse def. Katsuyori Shibata & Wataru Inoue

El Samurai & Minoru Tanaka def. Team 2000 (Koji Kanemoto & AKIRA)

Kazunari Murakami & Yuki Ishikawa def. King of the Hills (Hiroshi Tanahashi & Kenzo Suzuki)

Jushin Thunder Liger, The Great Sasuke & Tiger Mask def. Dick Togo & Team 2000 (Jado & Gedo)

Manabu Nakanishi def. Giant Silva

IWGP Junior Heavyweight Championship
Kendo Kashin def. Daijiro Matsui

BATT (Hiroshi Hase & Keiji Muto) def. Osamu Nishimura & Tatsumi Fujinami

Kensuke Sasaki vs. Naoya Ogawa (No Contest)

Team 2000 (Hiroyoshi Tenzan & Satoshi Kojima) def. Team 2000 (Giant Singh & Masahiro Chono)

GHC Heavyweight Championship

Jun Akiyama def. Yuji Nagata

It was, on the face of it, business as usual. Wrestling World 2002 directly followed on from Indicate of Next, wrapping up or advancing programs established in November.

Team 2000's new addition Koji Kanemoto was put opposite his former partner in Minoru Tanaka, and along with AKIRA frequently frustrated Tanaka and El Samurai's attempts to build momentum. Tanaka would get a quick crucifix pin to win the match but would quickly be beaten down by Kanemoto to advance toward a singles feud.

Jushin Liger meanwhile would continue his dispute with Jado and Gedo, who would reinvigorate the Kaientai DX and Michinoku Pro feud, recruiting Dick Togo as Liger pulled Great Sasuke and M-Pro's fourth generation Tiger Mask. Despite some truly frightening offence from Togo to Sasuke, including a German suplex that landed the masked man on his head on the entrance ramp and a brutal top rope senton, Liger's team would be victorious, vanquishing Tokyo Sports' pick for best tag team of 2001.

Hiroshi Tanahashi had rallied from his handicap loss to Giant Silva back in October and formed a tag team with 'super rookie' Kenzo Suzuki. The King of the Hills (sic) would be unsuccessful when Tanahashi, developing an egotistical attitude, stepped up to Battlarts founder Yuki Ishikawa and attempted to exchange strikes before being flattened. Tanahashi was 0-2 in the building he would later be synonymous with; meanwhile another young prospect New Japan were keen on in Katsuyori Shibata also made an unsuccessful Dome debut teaming with Wataru Inoue in the show opener.

Kendo Kashin's enigmatic behaviour continued in the face of PRIDE fighter and student of Nobuhiko Takada, Daijiro Matsui. Kashin would take three versions of the IWGP Junior Heavyweight title to the ring with him; one the official belt, one the original Junior Heavyweight Championship that Takada had held, brought at the behest of Matsui, and one more being Kashin's custom designed belt. Kashin won a largely dire bout, only to again throw down two of the three titles and walk off with his homemade belt.

Kensuke Sasaki's struggles with MMA opponents would continue, as he moved from Kazuyuki Fujita to Naoya Ogawa. Ogawa had been a surprise recruit to Shinya Hashimoto's Zero-One and appeared at Wrestling World as Antonio Inoki again tried to get attention on his

UFO brand for a 2002 revival. The match marked New Japan's apparently annual attempt to recreate the January 4, 1999 incident; Sasaki would attack Ogawa before the bell to a big reaction before Ogawa took his man down with an STO and landed repeated kicks to the head. Unlike Hashimoto in 1999 though, Sasaki would rally with a lariat and a big German suplex to send Ogawa to the floor before the no contest was handed down. Sasaki seemed to have overcome mixed martial artists on behalf of pro wrestling, but the end of his arc resulted in little of merit coming for the rest of 2002.

The main event meanwhile followed directly from Yuji Nagata's challenge at the end of Indicate of Next. Nagata had an excellent match with Jun Akiyama for NOAH's GHC title. The two were intent on proving their version of the Exploder suplex was most effective and focused their matches on their opponent's neck. A pair of piledrivers from Nagata were met by a DDT on the ramp and a Tombstone piledriver on the floor by Akiyama. Akiyama would withstand Nagata's trademark throws and submissions before using his boss Mitsuharu Misawa's Emerald Flowsion and two Wrist Clutch Exploders to retain his title.

Akiyama's choice of offense illustrated the partisan nature of the match; it wasn't a personal effort to him but rather Akiyama fighting on behalf of his company, and his loyalty was what won him the match. It conveniently hinted at Misawa's future presence in a New Japan ring. Everything tied together neatly, and everything seemed like business as usual. Except, that is, for the fact that New Japan were lucky the main event even happened, and that backstage, nothing at all was business as usual.

A mere five days earlier, Antonio Inoki staged his second annual Bom-Ba-Ye event from Saitama Super Arena. Inoki had grown increasingly close with K1 management, leading to an 'Inoki versus K1' theme to the show. In the semi main event, Yuji Nagata fought Mirko Cro Cop. The Croatian kickboxer was one of the most feared fighters in the world, while Nagata was taking part in his first fight. Unsurprisingly, the man who was positioned to lead New Japan over the next several years was destroyed in seconds.

Yuji Nagata's credibility as the face of a company that sold itself on realism and being the King of Sports was unnecessarily damaged. Further, had Nagata been seriously hurt, the Wrestling World main event would have been in serious jeopardy.

Rocky Romero
I was training on the regular with Inoki in 2002. Most of our training was shooters coming into the dojo and beating the crap out of us. Still, what Inoki kept saying to us was that he wanted to create something new, and make it represent him. He wasn't necessarily all about martial arts, though realism was very important to him. I think he wanted to create something different, and to try and capture the spirit of what UWF had.

Then there were people in New Japan that wanted to go back to what the root of 'pro wrestling' was. So there's this push and pull between Inoki and the company, which Inoki usually won because he was the owner. Nobody made Yuji take the fight, he wanted to fight; it's just that New Japan let him, and that wasn't the best decision.

Keiji Muto was chief detractor of the Inoki-ist direction of martial artists in the wrestling ring and vice versa. Commenting years later that the Inoki-ism direction would 'wipe out everything I'd achieved, everything I did in America, all of it,' Muto declared New Japan 'dead drunk' and walked out.[83]New Japan had lost another of its Three Musketeers, and a locker room leader in Muto, but also lost five front office staff, and Kendo Kashin and Satoshi Kojima, who would all head to All Japan. Kojima was a particularly damaging loss, as the 31-year-old was entering his prime, and was part of big plans along with Hiroyoshi Tenzan to depose Masahiro Chono as leader of Team 2000.

Muto also took away merchandising sales in the region of 50,000,000 Yen annually[84] from New Japan. Merchandising across the board was selling slower, and live attendance began to falter. On February 1, immediately after Muto, Kojima, Kashin and staff left, Chono would drag the tense politics backstage to the foreground, calling out Inoki from the ring in Sapporo, and being joined by Kenzo Suzuki declaring 'I don't see a bright future here'.

Inoki meanwhile seemed divested, eventually claiming in early February that he'd sold New Japan to K1 boss Katsuyoshi Ishii. This was immediately refuted by Chono, who stated that Inoki had no right to sell his share of the company without permission from the company board. To an extent, this was Inoki posturing to press by announcing a deal he would know wasn't going to be allowed, but the company was still in disarray. Chono would admit to being in meetings at the New Japan offices until midnight 'trying to form a coup d'etat… It was the worst time for the company. Nothing seemed to move.'[85] Things

would get worse before they got better.

New Japan Pro Wrestling
NJPW Toukon Kinenbi (Fighting Spirit Anniversary)
May 2, 2002
Attendance 57,500

Kintaro Kanemura def. Daisuke sekimoto

Katsuyori Shibata def. Wataru Inoue

Tiger Mask 3 & Tiger Mask 4 def. Black Tiger & El Samurai

Kaoru Ito & Momoe Nakanishi def. Manami Toyota & Yumiko Hotta

IWGP Junior Heavyweight Tag Team Championships
Jushin Thunder Liger & Minoru Tanaka def. Team 2000 (Jado & Gedo)

OH-Gun (Naoya Ogawa & Shinya Hashimoto) def. Team 2000 (Hiroyoshi Tenzan & Scott Norton)

Bas Rutten def. Manabu Nakanishi

Don Frye def. Tadao Yasuda

Steiner Brothers (Rick & Scott Steiner) def. Hiroyoshi Tanahashi & Kensuke Sasaki

IWGP Heavyweight Championship
Yuji Nagata def. Yoshihiro Takayama

Masahiro Chono vs Mitsuharu Misawa (Time limit draw)

Art imitates life, and when Masahiro Chono summoned Antonio Inoki to the ring in Sapporo, backstage tensions became a featured part of New Japan's next Dome outing. In response to Chono's heated complaint that on behalf of New Japan roster he 'wanted to be here to wrestle,' as opposed to deal with backstage politics, Inoki fired back that he should use his anger. 'People today have forgotten what it means to be truly angry. Pro wrestling is where we bring anger to the

ring and fight with it. That's our message. That's New Japan-ism'

As a result, Chono would enlist Hiroyoshi Tenzan and Scott Norton on behalf of Team 2000 to take on the surprise Inoki pairing of Naoya Ogawa and Shinya Hashimoto. The legendary rivals teamed up in a move that both were hesitant to call a one off, but neither seemed eager to commit to.

Hashimoto said he was glad to 'stand before New Japan and fight on behalf of Zero-One,' after the match while saying that he and Ogawa will take separate paths for now but nobody knew what the future held. Ogawa for his part stated that things were just getting started, but that certainly wasn't the case in New Japan. A far more typical pro wrestling style match than was common with Ogawa involved ended with a spectacular STO and German suplex combo for the win over Tenzan and Norton. It would be Hashimoto's last match in the company, and Ogawa's penultimate, the two teaming a few more times in 2003 and 2004, but not in a New Japan ring.

More representative of the Inoki-ist style was Bas Rutten's bout with Manabu Nakanishi. Rutten had a few bouts with Battlarts over the prior couple of years, and while the MMA influence on NJPW wasn't beneficial to everyone, it did augment Nakanishi into a more compelling figure. Against pro wrestlers, Nakanishi could be exposed by a limited offense, but in an MMA-esque environment, he seemed more like a focused athlete with a game plan. Nakanishi would try to place his opponent into the Argentine backbreaker, but was foiled by a doggedly determined Rutten who maintained a hold on his rear choke through suplexes and slams before transitioning to a triangle to submit the big man.

As much as Rutten and Nakanishi was well constructed and intense, Don Frye and Tadao Yasuda was hackneyed and plodding. This was a match set up in Inoki's recently opened dojo in Los Angeles; effectively a playground for Inoki near his LA home that he hoped would breed athletes that could compete in MMA and pro wrestling simultaneously (and would also end up moulding a generation of top tier American talent). In a taped segment, Frye would have beef with Yasuda because he showed up one hour late to training, and this somehow led to a pull apart brawl between the Japanese and western martial artists.

It was a stretch, as was Yasuda being stretchered out of the building when Frye assaulted him during his entrance. What would even

sensationally be described as a light scuffle would see match order shifted to let Nakanishi and Rutten go first, giving Yasuda a chance to recover. This he would do, only to submit to Frye in a brief and flat match.

This was the undisputed low light in an otherwise fitting anniversary show; a card that paid tribute to the past with an eye on the future. A pair of junior heavyweight tag matches leaned on nostalgia as third and fourth generation Tiger Masks teamed up, and Jushin Liger challenged for the IWGP junior tag titles in a 1989 styled body suit. Yet both pointed to what was to come. The newer Tiger Mask just signed full time to NJPW would take on Silver King, who had taken over the Black Tiger name, while Liger would call out amassed junior heavyweights from NOAH at ringside after he and Minoru Tanaka captured tag gold.

Elsewhere, new directions were more radical. While Big Japan's presence on the show, an opener between hardcore veteran Kintaro 'Wing' Kanemura and 21-year-old Daisuke Sekimoto was merely as a guest, the All Japan Women had a more significant mark to make. A remarkably physical AJW tag match, most notable for Manabu Toyota's vicious dropkicks, including to the floor at one point, was no mere exhibition. Rather, this was meant to be a 'historical first step,' in the words of announcers; the launch of a women's division in New Japan.

NJPW would book wrestlers from the now much diminished *joshi* scene over the course of summer 2002. The project didn't last long however, mainly as most women's matches on a card were presented as sideshows populated by freelance guests. There was no-one on the New Japan side that would represent the company itself or carry the fledgling division forward. Well, almost no-one.

Joanie Laurer had broken ground during her tenure in the WWF as Chyna, but displeasure at her position, ill-faring contract negotiations and mounting personal issues led to her departure in 2001. When Inoki opened his Santa Monica Dojo, Laurer was invited to attend[86], and New Japan at large saw a chance to capitalize on her international name value while boosting their plans for a women's division.

Laurer would debut at the Anniversary show, added somewhat arbitrarily as special referee for a match between The Steiners and Kensuke Sasaki teaming with Hiroshi Tanahashi. Tanahashi was a

surrogate for the departed Hiroshi Hase, springing up the card, but taking more than a few lumps in the process, being brutally suplexed by both Steiners and taking a Screwdriver from Scott for the loss.

Laurer had limited physical involvement in the match, but would declare post-match that she was ready to fight anyone that could be put in front of her. The AJW crew entered the ring, ready to take the former Chyna on, but Laurer bailed, seemingly making future plans clear.

Still, much as in the WWF, Laurer was resolute in wanting to face male wrestlers rather than other women, a move that lead to a diminished role for the women's matches on the card before they disappeared altogether. Laurer too would be out of the company and seemingly wrestling at large by the end of the year.

Around for the long haul was Yuji Nagata. If the loss to Cro Cop on New Year's Eve was harmful to him and the company at large, Nagata was unwilling to show that damage in ring. Matured as a talent, Nagata would win the IWGP heavyweight championship in April, and would embark on a 392-day reign, his first challenger being Yoshihiro Takayama.

A tale of Takayama's strikes against Nagata's suplexes, this was a tremendous match that was a strong indication of the value an MMA flavour of pro wrestling had with the right people. Takayama's blows were met with visceral groans from the crowd, while Nagata withstood his challengers assault and a pair of Everest German suplexes, finally hitting a head kick for the surprise victory. The sudden finish gave a sports like feel that anything could happen at any moment, and Nagata's title reign had received a stamp of approval.

Takayama would continue to work as a top-level freelancer in both pro wrestling and MMA for the next two years. One month after his match with Nagata, Takayama was shot to superstardom by a thrilling PRIDE fight with Don Frye, but the damage done by his twin schedules would play a heavy hand in a 2004 stroke that nearly ended his career.

The show would culminate in Mitsuharu Misawa's first New Japan appearance. Chono, once the antiestablishment lone wolf was now the establishment of NJPW, and Misawa, himself an ace of one company turned boss of another stood in almost complete symmetry.

The physical nature of Misawa elbows and Chono's kenka kicks was as expected, though an Emerald Flowsion on the entrance ramp was a shockingly dangerous moment. Each wrestler's entourage would be factored into the match, with Team 2000 removing the top rope early in the match presumably to prevent any flying offense from Misawa, though the NOAH crew quickly replaced it.

It was a tug of war that lasted 30 minutes to a time limit draw, a departure from how cross promotion had been handled in the past. Under Choshu's direction, feuds the like of UWFi's invasion would see respective talent consistently and decisively win 'at home,' an approach which preached to the choir of a promotion's fans, and ultimately meant the larger fish would come out on top. NOAH's insistence (particularly that of notorious hard bargainer and former secretary to Giant Baba, Ryu Nakata) was that NOAH would either come out on a level footing or on top of all big cross promotional matches, which boosted the promotion's credibility in the eyes of fans during its infancy.

NOAH felt like a well-oiled machine in comparison to the turbulent New Japan scene. On May 31, 2002 Riki Choshu held a press conference at the New Japan Dojo to announce that he was leaving the company he'd been almost exclusively attached to since its opening. In a 55-minute diatribe, Choshu was scathing toward Inoki, declaring his presence as the sole reason for his departure. Choshu would spit that 'something has chipped away at the man he once was,' that 'now I understand why (Giant)Baba never trusted him,' and that Chono was doing his best but wouldn't last long in his creative spot[87].

Inoki for his part was dismissive of Choshu's departure, claiming he didn't care about his rant and wishing him the best in his future endeavours. The departures didn't end there, however, as Choshu would start a new promotion called World Japan, along with key New Japan figures like Tiger Hattori, Katsuji Nagashima and Kensuke Sasaki. In the three, New Japan had lost a major in ring hand, and two of its best front negotiators and officials to go along with the talent loss to All Japan in January. As much as its anniversary show showed promise in ring, the political landscape continued to appear bleak.

Universal Fighting arts Organization
Sekai Saikyou Densetsu (The World's Strongest Legend): UFO Legend
August 8, 2002
Attendance: 28,648

(All matches under 'MMA rules')

Hirotaka Yokoi def. Bulldozer George

Jens Pulver def. Takehiro Murahama

Vladimir Matyushenko def. Antonio Rogerio Nogueira

Joanie Laurer def. Chika Nakamura

Mario Sperry def. Wataru Sakata

Wallid Ismael def. Kazunari Murakami

Antonio Rodrigo Nogueira def. Sanae Kikuta

Kazuyuki Fujita def. Tadao Yasuda

Naoya Ogawa def. Matt Ghaffari

August 8 is a significant date in Antonio Inoki's career. On August 8, 1988, New Japan hosted an event called Super Monday in Yokohama from the Yokohama Cultural Gymnasium. It was headlined by Tatsumi Fujinami defending the IWGP heavyweight championship against Inoki. Fujinami was the champion, but only after Inoki had to vacate his one and only reign due to a broken foot; Fujinami may have been the man, but Inoki was still The Man.

Inoki and Fujinami wrestled to a legendary 60-minute draw. After the bell rang, a humbled Inoki embraced the champion; he might not have lost, but Inoki was finally passing the torch to his protege. In the months to come, Inoki would appear in the opening match on cards, pledging to start his career over again from the beginning; it was the first step in a ten-year process of retiring from active in ring participation.

Fourteen years removed from that event, and Inoki would run his last show as sole promoter; for the time being at least. Yet while the 8/8/88 Super Monday was an endeavour that etched itself into hearts, minds and pro wrestling history, 8/8/02's UFO Legend was a show that most would forget, and many more would wish to.

Legend had a huge uphill battle in front of it. It was the return of a brand that had disappeared three years prior and wasn't popular when it was active. To make that return in such a huge building was a baffling choice, let alone on August 8, which was a weekday. While New Japan's annual commitment to a January 4 event often sees stretches of slow years in terms of ticket sales, It's at least buoyed by fans adding one extra day to the New Year's vacations. August 8 was a work day, a Thursday in fact. Not only that, but if anyone in NJPW was wary of Inoki's commitment to the company he still had a majority stake in, Legend was running head to head with New Japan, albeit a G1 show in Hokkaido at the far end of the country.

Still, stops were pulled out in a bid to make the event a success. Inoki partnered with Tokyo Sports for promotion, and NTV aired the event in prime time. To drum up ticket sales, there was the prospect of fights featuring the Nogueira twins, established names in PRIDE at the time. There was the prospect of Joanie Laurer continuing her relationship with Inoki and having her first 'MMA' (though the match would ultimately be far more in the pro wrestling realm) match. Even Mike Tyson was rumoured to make the trip[88]. Though this was hot air, Rickson Gracie was adding a celebrity guest value, there to set up a potential bout with Naoya Ogawa.

The event, to put it generously, flopped. The announced 28,648 attendance was similarly generous, given the broad swathes of the Dome that sat empty. The Gracie and Ogawa fight, hinted at at the end of the show would never come to pass. While plans were discussed for a January return to the Dome[89], NTV had aired Legend with the expectation it would attain a 15% audience share and the show only scraped together 10.8[90].

The Gracie and Ogawa confrontation came at the end of a comical main event. Promoted as a battle of two Olympians, Ogawa faced Atlanta '96 silver medalist wrestler Matt Ghaffari. Six years removed from the Olympic mats though, Ghaffari was in awful shape and lost in a minute as Inoki watched from ringside with a look of grim resignation. Ogawa would rub the salt in the wound by grabbing the microphone afterward and express disbelief that his opponent 'would be quite this fat'.

While pre-show promotion was insistent that Legend would be an entirely *'gachinko'* (shoot MMA) affair, the result was a mix of the two. Kazuyuki Fujita's win over Tadao Yasuda was in the pro wrestling realm, while Joanie Laurer's foray into mixed martial arts was decidedly more WWF than UFC. With legitimately no opponent decided until the day of the show as plans kept changing, Laurer declared an open challenge from the ring. This prompted Chika Nakamura, an America based kickboxer who had recently won a Golden Gloves lightweight tournament in the States, to stand from the front row. Fortunately, she was dressed to fight, and the ensuing skirmish was kept mercifully brief, Nakamura coming towards Laurer with jabs who responded with a single uppercut before pounding from a mount to draw a referee stoppage.

The real issue wasn't the presentation of pro wrestling as martial arts at Legend, but that the purest of martial arts bouts on the card were poor at drawing an audience, and not fun to watch for the audience that showed up. UFO was dead, and New Japan would go back to being the sole outlet for Inoki-ism.

Jordan Breen
There were moments here, but everything was handled so badly. Jens Pulver almost losing to Takehiro Murahama is just bananas. Pulver had just left UFC and was phoning it in against a bantamweight shoot boxer in Murahama, and nearly paid for it on a split decision. They could really have gone all in on a Murahama underdog story, but nobody had faith in him, or believed he was really anything. Nobody left the card any better for it.

New Japan Pro Wrestling
NJPW The Spiral
October 14, 2002
Attendance: 50,000

Blue Wolf def. Toru Yano

Team 2000 (Jado & Gedo) def. El Samurai & Wataru Inoue

Team 2000 (Hiro Saito & Tatsutoshi Goto) def. Shiro Koshinaka & Takashi Iizuka

Jushin Thunder Liger, Masahito Kakihara & Tiger Mask def. American Dragon, Ricky Reyes & Rocky Romero

Minoru Fujita & Shinya Makabe def. King of the Hills (Hiroshi Tanahashi & Kenzo Suzuki)

IWGP Junior Heavyweight Championship
Koji Kanemoto def. Heat

NWF Heavyweight Championship Tournament: Semi Final
Tsuyoshi Kohsaka def. Tadao Yasuda

Yutaka Yoshie def. Ryushi Yanagisawa

European Catch Rules
Bas Rutten vs Osamu Nishimura (Draw after 10 rounds)

Kazunari Murakami def. Masayuki Naruse

'Great Muta' def. Hiroyoshi Tenzan

Masahiro Chono def. Joanie Laurer

Bob Sapp def. Manabu Nakanishi

IWGP Heavyweight Championship
Yuji Nagata def. Kazuyuki Fujita

2002 had been a whirlwind year for New Japan. From talent and front office departures to sales beginning to plummet, a lot had gone on, and The Spiral title was a blunt commentary on the state of the promotion.

As income spiralled downward, spending spiralled in the opposite direction, with big money being thrown across the card to mixed results.

The Spiral was mainly promoted around the pro wrestling debut of Bob Sapp. The product of Colorado Springs, Sapp had a brief career in American football, but would ultimately only play one game in the NFL, plagued with steroid abuse allegations and ultimately an Achilles tendon injury[91].

Like many failed football players in the US, Sapp drifted toward wrestling, and was quickly snapped up by WCW. Trained in their Power Plant, the promotion was eager to push a new intimidating former footballer to the fore in the same vein as Bill Goldberg. Unfortunately for WCW and for Sapp, the WWF was months away from purchasing their competition, and Sapp was cut.

In the Powerplant with Sapp at the time was Australian kickboxer Sam Greco. Greco, unconcerned by WCW's folding, simply headed back to

Japan, where he had fought for K-1 with a broadly positive record through the mid 1990s. Seeing Yen signs in Sapp that the WWF was passing up, Greco introduced Sapp to K-1 management, and a major celebrity was born.

Sappmania wasn't quite at its peak in late 2002, but with protected fights in PRIDE and K-1, his size and natural charisma was able to shine. Soon enough he would crest a wave of endorsements and TV appearances, even producing a comically terrible rap album. Still, his star was in the ascendancy, and his first pro wrestling match some time removed from the Powerplant was worthy of the high billing as a spectacle.

While his bout with Manabu Nakanishi wasn't the smoothest, it also provided the fireworks most were looking for. Sapp hit a huge powerbomb to Nakanishi out of the gate, and from there the story was of the giant Sapp doing everything Nakanishi could do from football tackle to Argentine backbreaker, but that much more effectively (Sapp's promos had focused on Nakanishi being a 'little beast' compared to the 'real Beast' he was). As Nakanishi mounted a comeback, Sapp landed an impressive dropkick to get a rise out of the crowd, and Nakanishi was counted out. It was an anticlimactic finish, but Sapp had outperformed expectations.

Sceptics, however, pointed to Sapp's position as a highly paid and highly featured outsider in a period that was hurting for new stars. Hiroshi Tanahashi, Kenzo Suzuki and Katsuyori Shibata were all still works in progress, while Toru Yano, a standout college amateur, (albeit with no history as a fan at all) had only debuted back in May. At the top of the card meanwhile was another expensive outsider in Joanie Laurer.

Laurer would wrestle a full schedule through the September and October New Japan tours, challenging Masahiro Chono throughout. Chono for his part would say he wouldn't wrestle a woman, until he was goaded into the match after a series of post-match run-ins and low blows. The misogyny busting female superhero role had worked well for Laurer in America, but it struggled in 2002 New Japan.

Here Chono made for the biggest name opponent to Laurer, but his stance as the wrestler's wrestler performing on behalf of the boys against Inoki's MMA tinged vision ruined the dynamic. Chono would be cheered on his entrance and praised by announcers for throwing the curve balls pitched by Inoki right back at him. Two tough yet

sympathetic figures against one another led to a strange atmosphere not helped by Laurer's awkward lariats. Ultimately Chono scored a kenka kick to win a mercifully short match; Laurer would wrestle a few more tags in New Japan before all but retiring by the end of the year.

Laurer was an expensive talent representing the expensive LA Dojo, but Inoki's American playground was also attracting exciting prospects from the American west coast. As changes were made in NJPW's match making committee, there was a desire to see a return on the LA investment, bringing opportunities for people who would become significant names.

Rocky Romero
New Japan wasn't too happy with the (LA) Dojo because it was so expensive. It was in Santa Monica, a really nice facility, and they had to pay a staff there as well, including Simon (Inoki, Antonio's son-in-law). So, they were a little standoffish about all the Dojo guys. Then Brian Danielson, one of the best wrestlers that's ever lived, shows them what he can do and they're like 'OK, we have something'. And I did OK, Ricky Reyes did OK, TJ (Perkins, then wrestling as Pinoy Boy) did OK. They just didn't want the Dojo around politically because it was sucking money. Fortunately, Brian and I were able to break through that barrier and that showed in the future.

Elsewhere in the card, what felt like the broader horizons and experimentation on display in May had spiralled into a scattershot, and even petty approach. Pseudo MMA matches were scattered throughout the card, most short and lacking in drama.

It had seemed like the mixed martial arts influence would be partitioned into its own division earlier in the year; Kazuyuki Fujita declared his intention to have a belt 'for real fighters' and along with Inoki resurrected the NWF Heavyweight Championship previously used prior to the IWGP title's inception. It was a plan riddled with confusion though. Primarily, if the NWF title was contended for by real fighters, what made up the rest of the show? Why would Fujita, having been eliminated in the tournament to crown the NWF champion, then challenge Yuji Nagata for the IWGP title? The balance between pro wrestling and martial artistry was still an awkward one, and fans of both were displeased.

Bas Rutten and Osamu Nishimura (who had beaten cancer by this

point) presented something different; a thirty-minute draw contested under European catch wrestling rules with three minute rounds. While the submission wrestling at play was strong, it was met with silence from a crowd unfamiliar with either the style or long form pacing. Nishimura would even say afterward 'perhaps this kind of match doesn't belong in our era. This was more at home with a Tatsumi Fujinami, a Dory Funk Jr., a Tony St. Claire'.

Left out in the cold by old school matches like these, and the martial arts presentation at large, was the younger audience that had been drawn in by the junior heavyweight explosion, and the real-life superhero figures of Tiger Mask and Jushin Liger. New Japan tried to respond to this by repackaging Minoru Tanaka as Heat.

Tying in with a videogame called *Tokon Heat* on the Game Boy Advance, the character never caught on. The game Heat was based on, an RPG style affair about a teenager taking on the Heat character to do battle in the ring, was received poorly by press and public. Tanaka himself, meanwhile, was a poor pick for the role; a good looking young wrestler that could have courted the waning young female fanbase in New Japan was put under a mask and seemed uncomfortable in the role. Carrying his rivalry with Koji Kanemoto forward to the new character at The Spiral, Tanaka seemed as out of place as his opponent had when he embodied Tiger Mask.
If Minoru Tanaka was in a difficult spot character wise, Troy Endres had an even taller task ahead of him. Another product of the WCW Powerplant left hanging by their acquisition by the WWF, Endres had the unenviable assignment of becoming the second Great Muta.

In the mid 1990s, WWF had responded to WCW signing away Kevin Nash and Scott Hall by exercising their copyrights on the Diesel and Razor Ramon characters they had played. The fake Diesel and Razor wrestled a handful of matches before being consigned to history; the fake Diesel finding fame as Kane in WWF, and Rick Bognar returning to his Big Titan name and actually joining nWo Japan in NJPW.

History repeated as New Japan dealt with the loss of Keiji Muto by making their own 'new' Great Muta. Despite the now 54-year-old Great Kabuki working as his manager to add credibility, neither Endres nor anyone else had any hope of being accepted in Muto's stead. Kabuki's mist would lead to a win for the powerhouse Endres over Hiroyoshi Tenzan, but to little response from the crowd. This would be the one and only singles bout for the second Great Muta, and the idea was all but scrapped after just a month.

In a promotion that was otherwise spiraling into disarray, Yuji Nagata was a force of consistency. Fujita would contend he didn't want the IWGP title as he challenged Yuji Nagata, but at the champion's insistence the belt was on the line, and Nagata closed The Spiral with a bout that fell short of his matches with Takayama and Akiyama in 2002, but still brought excitement. Fujita would pound Nagata with strikes in the corner and as the referee separated the two it seemed like Nagata was in danger. Three successive backdrop suplexes later though and Nagata retained.

The match was brief at 12 minutes, but played to Fujita's strengths, Nagata continuing to be adept in bringing out the best in pro wrestlers and martial artists when defending the IWGP title. At any rate, Nagata was two weeks away from another defense against Masahiro Chono which would go to a full 60-minute draw; in that regard, his early night was somewhat understandable.

2003

New Japan Pro Wrestling
NJPW Wrestling World 2003
January 4, 2003
Attendance: 50,000

Osamu Nishimura def. Tatsumi Fujinami

Young Generation Cup Semi Final
Yutaka Yoshie def. Shinya Makabe

Young Generation Cup Semi Final
Ryushi Yanagisawa def. Kenzo Suzuki

Makai Club (Dai Majin & Makai 1) def. Hiro Saito & Tatsutoshi Goto

Harima Ou'Z (Makai 4 & Makai 5) def. Masahito Kakihara & Takashi Iizuka

Jushin Thunder Liger, Koji Kanemoto & Takehiro Murahama def. Heat, Masayuki Naruse & Tiger Mask

Young Generation Cup Final
Ryushi Yanagisawa def. Yutaka Yoshie

Michiyoshi Ohara & Shinsuke Nakamura def. Kazunari Murakami & Tadao Yasuda

Hiroyoshi Tenzan & Satoshi Kojima def. Manabu Nakanishi & Masahiro Chono

NWF Heavyweight Championship
Yoshihiro Takayama def. Tsuyoshi Kohsaka

IWGP Heavyweight Championship
Yuji Nagata def. Josh Barnett

Three months after his decidedly old school bout with Bas Rutten,

Osamu Nishimura faced Tatsumi Fujinami in the opener of Wrestling World 2003. A deliberate throwback of a match, Nishimura did his best Antonio Inoki impression as he navigated Fujinami into a cobra twist, nearly lost to a dragon screw after missing a top rope knee drop and won with a Japanese rolling cradle. As the opening to the show it was a statement of what was to come; here was the tribute to wrestling's past as the coming hours would attempt to show New Japan's future.

The Young Generation Cup, a one night, four-person tournament to shine a light on newer talent, was a positive concept, but not without fault. The idea was to ensure a young, fresh challenger for the IWGP championship the next month in Hokkaido. Still, two of the four, Shinya Makabe and Ryushi Yanagisawa were already in their thirties by Wrestling World 2003.

Yanagisawa was nevertheless a relatively fresh face to New Japan audiences as a result of his MMA career, one which was the drive behind him winning the cup as Yuji Nagata stood set to face yet another fighter. Makabe meanwhile had been toiling away for nearly six years in the company, and his elimination at Yutaka Yoshie's hands was another frustrating blow as the now heavyweight struggled to get noticed, especially after mentor Riki Choshu had departed the company.

If two thirty-year olds seemed a bit strange to represent a youthful direction for the company, somebody wrestling their last match for the promotion was a still more peculiar choice. Yet that was the case with Kenzo Suzuki. A year removed from his comments to Antonio Inoki that he couldn't see a bright future in New Japan, he would sporadically tag with King of the Hills partner Hiroshi Tanahashi through 2002 before wrestling his last NJPW match at Wrestling World.

Suzuki's departure was the result of machinations outside of New Japan's control, somewhat. As NJPW's network TV output shrunk to a late night thirty-minute slot on TV Asahi, TV rights were supplemented by a deal with J-Sports. Under the title of New Japan SXW, the satellite network would air highlights and complete shows.

New Japan wasn't the only wrestling content on J-Sports, however. After dabbling with re-entering the market but never fully committing through much of the 1990s, World Wrestling Entertainment (having rebranded from the WWF the prior May) was taking Japan more

seriously again. A March 2002 show at Yokohama Arena did well, and the company was set to run five shows in Japan through 2003.

They were also expanding their TV presence with a new deal for their programming on J-Sports, which aired on a delay with subtitles for their story driven action and commentary. As part of their broadcast deal, J-Sports demanded that a Japanese star receive a featured role on WWE programming, and asked New Japan to loan them Tanahashi; NJPW baulked and handed over Suzuki instead.[92]

While the four in the Young Generation Cup were somewhat of a stopgap, there were three other young talents New Japan were concentrating on more keenly, and Hiroshi Tanahashi was one of them. Tanahashi had garnered attention in the mainstream news at the end of 2002. On November 28, after Tanahashi split up with TV talent Hitomi Hara, the spurned Hara stabbed the young wrestler twice in the back. Though Tanahashi took his motorbike and rode himself to the nearest hospital, he'd lost a potentially lethal 1.8 litres of blood in the process[93] . January 4 saw his return to the ring after the show's most heated match.

After Satoshi Kojima left for All Japan, Hiroyoshi Tenzan would go back to his ChoTen team with Masahiro Chono. Still though, Tenzan's elevation to the main event mix, teased a year prior, was only to be cemented in 2003. Later in the year, he would win his first of three G1 Climaxes, but in January had to definitively break away from Chono.

As Chono teamed with a Manabu Nakanishi who had sided with him against the Inoki-ists through 2002, Tenzan arranged a one night only reunion with Kojima. Chono had declared that 'to a real wrestler, promotions and borders don't matter; we do our talking in the ring', leading to a multi-faceted tag match with energy much of the card lacked being put in place. Tenzan and Kojima were fighting for the younger third generation against the elder statesman Chono, while Nakanishi was fighting for promotional pride against Kojima who had deserted the company. As the match broke down to four-way exchanges of lariats and Kenka kicks, it was down to Chono and Tenzan in ring. Chono withstood a headbutt but not a Tenzan Tombstone, and a career defining year for Tenzan had an impressive start.

Tanahashi would jump in the ring post bout and brawl with Kojima, looking to make a statement against the All Japan representative. Nakanishi, demanding the younger man know his place, would slam

Tanahashi for his troubles, but it was clear the future Ace would have a featured role in 2003.

Less visible despite grand intentions was Katsuyori Shibata. After an excursion to Mexico, Shibata would return in the summer of 2002, but wrestling primarily as the masked Makai #4.

The Makai (Hell) Club was a high camp mid card take on the ongoing backstage power struggles in New Japan. The group was managed by Kantaro Hoshino, a veteran of the old Japan Wrestling Alliance who, with Kim 'Kintaro Oki' Il, was a pioneer and icon in the Korean pro wrestling scene. As Antonio Inoki was engaging in diplomatic efforts and running his shows in North Korea, Hoshino was ending his career. This would lead to Inoki addressing Hoshino at his Ryogoku retirement and thanking him for his efforts.

Seven years later and Hoshino led a group of masked men who were billed as spiritual soldiers who worshipped Antonio Inoki as a deity. Shibata and former kick boxer Mitsuharu Nagai would be specifically highlighted as a tag team and had a good showing against Masahito Kakihara and (now somewhat lost in the mix after a strong start to the 2000s) Takashi Iizuka. Still, the concept of serious fighters assuming somewhat absurd characters was tough for fans to swallow.

By far the most emphasised young name at Wrestling World was Shinsuke Nakamura. While the likes of Tadao Yasuda and Kazuyuki Fujita were the heavily promoted faces of Inoki-ism in 2002, as the calendar rolled over, a lot of energy would be put into promoting the LA Dojo's first in house projects that would compete in both MMA and pro wrestling matches. One, Brazilian Japanese Lyoto Machida, would be drawn to the UFC soon after his debut. Nakamura would receive but reject similar overtures in the mid 2000s ('UFC offered me a chance to fight for them,' Nakamura recalled in 2017. 'It was a good opportunity, but I was under contract and I decided to stay')[94]. It was his loyalty, combined with a rare potential and charisma that led to him being dubbed the 'Supernova'.

Nakamura would have an exhibition match with Yasuda the prior August, but Wrestling World was his true unveiling. From the outset, announcers heavily pushed the idea that the 23-year-old was someone to keep an eye on, and his presentation was almost unprecedented. For a native Japanese talent to debut so high up the card was one surprise; his lack of traditional Young Lion black tights and character building losses quite another. Indeed, so concerned were management

that fellow talent would be upset at his preferential treatment, Nakamura was given his ring gear mere minutes before his debut and told to change in secret[95].

Nakamura was earmarked as special in ring as well. With a German suplex and a choke on Yasuda avenging his exhibition loss in August, Nakamura seemed all the more impressive as blood streamed down his face. Just as Yuji Nagata had headed into 2002 after a New Year's Eve knockout, Nakamura was only four nights removed from an Inoki Bom-Ba-Ye loss to Daniel Gracie. Nakamura was nevertheless competitive in defeat, but received a nasty cut above his eye that soon came open in the Tokyo Dome.

So it was that MMA had a heavy hold on a Wrestling World show once more, and this time, that hold extended into the two main events. The NWF championship tournament reached its conclusion with Yoshihiro Takayama beating Akira Maeda student Tsuyoshi Kohsaka, while Yuji Nagata beat former UFC champion Josh Barnett in his first pro wrestling match. As was the issue back in October, it seemed strange that rather than the NWF title being held as separate from the IWGP championship, both titles were contested as Pro wrestling and MMA hybrids, and both had a heavy emphasis on grappling.

Takayama would have a particularly tough time in his match. A blow to the face would see his left eye swollen shut, and the lights lost power midway through, causing him and Kohsaka to wrestle for a minute in darkness. A knee to the head would clinch the match for Takayama, but the win came to a crowd reception that was muted compared to the TenKoji tag match just prior.

Barnett, for his part, was charismatic and comfortable for someone wrestling his first pro match in the main event of the Tokyo Dome. Nagata won with a Wrist Clutch Exploder that supposedly knocked Barnett out long enough for the referee to count three as he would transition to a cross face but get pulled off the champion. The question mark afterward though was whether a rank outsider should have been in the main event spot, and then, as good as their prior match had been, whether Takayama staring down Nagata after the show and teasing a champion versus champion bout right away was the best decision. Question marks would continue to hang over New Japan as it forged ahead in 2003.

Wrestle-1
Fantasy Fight 2nd Wrestle-1
January 19, 2003
Attendance: 45,371

Abdullah the Butcher def. Sata… Yarn

Royal Brothers (Anthony W Mori & Henry III Sugawara) & Taiji Ishimori def. Italian Connection (Shuji Condotti, Milano Collection AT & YOSHINO)

Kendo Kashin def. Sabu

Kaz Hayashi & Ultimo Dragon def. GDI (Rey Bucanero & Ultimo Guerrero)

Hiroshi Hase & Satoshi Kojima def. New Texas Broncos (Terry Funk & Heath Herring)

Kevin Randleman & Mark Coleman def. Jan the Giant Convict & Singh the Giant Convict

Shinya Hashimoto def. Joe Son

Bill Goldberg & Keiji Muto def. KroniK (Bryan Clarke & Brian Adams)

Ernesto Hoost def. Bob Sapp

2002 had been a busy year for All Japan Pro Wrestling. Keiji Muto had jumped to the company full time in January, but the overtures made toward him weren't simply as a wrestler.

All Japan had been ensnared in legal issues since the NOAH departures. Ten former AJPW front office workers, now working for Mitsuharu Misawa, were fighting for unpaid severance money from their former employers. In July of 2002, Motoko Baba and AJPW settled out of court to the tune of 29.7 million Yen (approx. 248,500USD)[96]. With diminished TV rights and licensing income, as well as smaller live gates, this was a big hit to the company coffers. Muto was installed as president, and by September, Baba had transferred her majority ownership to the former New Japan star.

Under Muto, All Japan set out to distance itself from the *Oudou* style of its past, heavy as it was with connections to the stars who had departed for NOAH. Muto saw an avenue for a more American 'sports entertainment' feel. All Japan sold the concept as returning to a slogan Baba himself had coined in 1989 for *Oudou*: 'bright, fun, tough, new'.[97] The media, meanwhile, would call this style 'Package Pro Wrestling' in reference to the 'all in one' circus-like presentation of WWE. There would be a talent connection to WWE as well; while no official partnership existed, that 90s mainstay Johnny Ace was working as an agent to the American giant meant that wrestlers released from their contracts would frequently pop up in AJPW shortly afterward.

The change in direction would result in a lot of criticism; a consequence, Muto would state, of 'a lot of (fans) just not coming to terms with Baba being gone'. Yet Muto was firm in his conviction of where All Japan should go. 'We were doing good stuff, fun stuff, and stuff I had a lot of confidence in.'[98]

Meanwhile, after Antonio Inoki's rumoured sale of New Japan to K-1 was shut down, promoter Kazuyoshi Ishii was still eager to get into the pro wrestling business. Rather than buying into the field, Ishii arranged a partnership with Muto for a semi regular series of shows separate from All Japan and K-1. Wrestle-1, tying into the company branding somewhat, was the result. Muto would lend pro wrestlers from AJPW, with some collaboration with Ultimo Dragon, who had been running lucha libre/Japanese wrestling hybrid Toryumon since 1999. Ishii and K-1 would bring some of their popular fighters for name value, including Bob Sapp. Sapp's fame had only continued to

soar since his appearance at NJPW's The Spiral, and his K-1 deal meant that New Japan didn't have pro wrestling exclusivity with the Beast anymore.

The third piece of the puzzle was Dream Stage Entertainment. The PRIDE owners had been working closely with K-1, allowing fighters to frequently move between the two promotions. DSE was riding high on PRIDE's huge success and were willing to work with Ishii to make their own mark on the pro wrestling space, albeit with some provisos. 'If DSE was going into pro wrestling, it couldn't be the kind of pro wrestling that already existed,' commented former DSE executive Nissho Yamaguchi in 2007[99]. 'Just matches with a winner and loser wasn't going to do it. It needed to be something that could only exist in a pro wrestling show'.

The result was a no expenses spared production heavily built around Bob Sapp. W-1 managed to bring a decent crowd of 12,807 to Yokohama Arena, though it was far from a total success. DSE had secured a broadcast deal in prime time with Fuji TV, for a clipped version of the full live show, which had aired on pay per view. The airing only achieved an 8.4% audience share for Fuji, which was a failure in prime time.

The broadcast deal remained in place for a second show in January, though, this time in the much bigger Tokyo Dome. Kicking off to an announced (and internally disappointing) crowd of 45,371, this show of American sports entertainment- Japanese style- was unique to say the least.

Sapp started the show dancing to a cover of Madonna's 'Holiday' before being interrupted by K-1 star Ernesto Hoost. The two engaged in a bout of verbal jousting that made the hammiest of WWE talk segments seem like masterpieces of subtlety and narrative, while a quickly (and understandably) flustered interpreter tried to describe the English jaw jacking to the bemused crowd. Hoost, eventually tiring of the situation, suggested Sapp disappear, which prompted a cloud of smoke to consume the giant fighter and leave the ring empty. This preceded a match between kick boxer Masaaki Satake and a near immobile Abdullah the Butcher, who was Bob Sapp's storyline father.

All this was in service of a main event that saw Sapp return as an angel from the heavens, flying to the ring on a wire and doling out confetti from his trunks. The Hoost and Sapp match itself was a terrible main event, with Sapp's kickboxing opponent trying and

failing to convincingly put the Beast in a variety of wrestling holds before whacking him with a chair and rolling him up for the three count.

The rest of the card proceeded in a largely traditional sense, albeit with some strange pairings and presentation. Kendo Kashin and Sabu was an odd match on paper, but provided decent action, as Sabu went hold for hold with the grounded Kashin until unleashing his trademark hardcore offense (and then, on losing, driving himself through a table for no reason in particular).

Heath Herring, along with Mark Coleman and Kevin Randleman, formed a trio of PRIDE representatives on the show. With Texas as a connection, Herring teamed with Terry Funk against Hiroshi Hase and Satoshi Kojima, who had special sound effects and big screen prompts for the crowd to cheer along to Hase's giant swing and Kojima's '*ichao ze, bakayaro!'* elbow drop. Coleman and Randleman meanwhile found themselves opposite Giant Singh and K-1's Jan Nortje, clad in convict suits and masks. Also representing PRIDE in a more comedic role was Joe Son, mist to the face not being enough for him to do much against Shinya Hashimoto, co-operating on behalf of Zero-One. This was the peak of Son's pro wrestling career, with the fighter later serving jail time for murder and rape.

In fact, of all the matches on the W-1 undercard, it was Ultimo Dragon's spectacular lucha displays and his Toryumon charges' tag exhibition that was presented as the most straight laced. Even so, there was a dose of odd; the *lucharesu* six man consisted of Milano Collection AT's Italian Connection and the Royal Brothers, all young Japanese talent convinced they were Italian and British respectively. In the six-man, only Taiji Ishimori was actually presented as Japanese, the 19 year old making his Japanese debut after training in Mexico, and making a victorious start to a career that would later see him in NOAH.

After his January 4, 2000 appearance on behalf of WCW fell through, Bill Goldberg finally making his Tokyo Dome debut here was a big part of promotion. It was the cause of a lot of DSE headaches as well. Goldberg was booked by DSE, and for a very high fee for a seven-show deal, in between his contract with Time Warner/WCW expiring and signing with WWE.

Communications were strained, however, and a story going into the W-1 show was that the promotion hadn't received any contact from

Goldberg in the days leading up to the show. This notwithstanding, the former WCW champion did eventually appear, and the skipped heartbeats were played towards during the show; Goldberg's entrance consisted of him walking from Suidobashi station into the Dome in real time as announcers mused that he'd just come off the plane at Narita airport.

This meant for a roughly ten-minute entrance as partner Muto and WCW alumni KroniK waited, apparently bored, in ring. The ensuing match, won with a Goldberg spear through a table and jackhammer, was nothing exciting, but DSE were at least relieved it happened.

So the second Wrestle-1 show ended, and as its cast of characters walked out to greet the fans and take a curtain call, there were mixed emotions. TV numbers were up; Fuji TV reported a 10.4% share for the show, but this wasn't enough to continue with a prime-time venture. Meanwhile, weak ticket sales and huge production costs made for a financial failure.

There would be one more DSE and K-1 produced Wrestle-1 show, but with K-1 and PRIDE ultimately competing over the same combat sports Yen, their relationship could only last so long. K-1 would part ways with DSE, taking the Wrestle-1 brand and concept with them and ultimately abandoning it (this would allow Muto to take the brand for himself when leaving All Japan in 2013).

Dream Stage meanwhile found themselves footing the bill for the Bill Goldberg deal. Goldberg still had appearances left on the contract, but with nowhere to appear. The company didn't want to just take the loss on Goldberg, and ultimately decided to build an entirely new promotion primarily to ride out the deal with the American star.[100]

The result, HUSTLE, would be run in conjunction with Hashimoto and Zero-One from 2004, and took a lot of the Wrestle-1 concepts further into the realm of absurdity. Eventually HUSTLE too would disappear after DSE was embroiled in a yakuza funding scandal, but at least, however briefly, life was formed in the wake of this strange wrestling experiment.

New Japan Pro Wrestling
NJPW Ultimate Festival
May 1, 2003
Attendance 11,000

Ryusuke Taguchi def. Pinoy Boy

AKIRA & Masahito Kakihara def. American Dragon & Rocky Romero

NJPW Alumnus Battle Royal
Kantaro Hoshino & Kotetsu Yamamoto def. George Takano, 'Great Muta', Haruka Eigen, Kengo Kimura, Kuniaki Kobayashi, Masashi Aoyagi & Osamu Kido

From the mid 2010s, New Japan expanded their January 4 events, by then redubbed Wrestle Kingdom, to several day festivals. Taking inspiration from WWE's Wrestlemania week, the day after Wrestle Kingdom would become New Year's Dash, a light hearted event that would also include a number of big surprises. January 3 meanwhile would see a day long fan event broadcast online and including a mix of matches and talk segments.

2003's Ultimate Festival seems forward thinking in retrospect, then. While the later Fan Festa events would take place in smaller venues, the Ultimate Festival took place from the same Tokyo Dome that would host Ultimate Crush the next day. Heiwa Corporation would in part foot the booking fees though, as the event was mainly to promote the company's New Japan and Antonio Inoki branded pachinko machines.

Mirroring the modern Wrestle Kingdom festivities meanwhile, New Japan experimented with internet broadcast of the festival through the IWTV streaming service. Two of its three matches focused on young dojo products. Ryusuke Taguchi made his Tokyo Dome debut after having his first match the prior November. Meanwhile Rocky Romero and Bryan 'American Dragon' Danielson were forming a solid tag team after earning management's trust as products of the LA Dojo.

The main event was a battle royal concept that would be recalled for the modern Wrestle Kingdom preshow rumble; while those matches included a mix of modern and old talent, this was purely for those out of the active mix. Amusingly this even included Troy Endres reprising the fake Great Muta character once more, having long since joined the Makai Club.

Matches aside, there were opportunities to play pachinko, receive a famous Inoki *binta* slap to the face, and even be one of 300 volunteers in an Indian leg wrestling tournament, which Inoki himself participated in. It was a light-hearted prelude to the serious business of the next day, and its two big main events.

New Japan Pro Wrestling
NJPW Ultimate Crush
May 2, 2003
Attendance: 55,000

IWGP Heavyweight Championship No.1 Contendership
Hiroyoshi Tenzan def. Hiroshi Tanahashi

Ken Shamrock def. Takashi Iizuka

IWGP Junior Heavyweight Tag Team Championships
Jushin Thunder Liger & Koji Kanemoto def. Tiger Mask & Heat

Ultimate Crush Rules
LYOTO def. Kengo Watanabe

Ultimate Crush Rules
Tsuyoshi Kohsaka def. Dolgorsürengiin Sumyaabazar

Ultimate Crush Rules
Shinsuke Nakamura def. Jan Nortje

Ultimate Crush Rules
Josh Barnett def. Jimmy Ambriz

Ultimate Crush Rules
Kazuyuki Fujita def. Manabu Nakanishi

Enson Inoue def. Kazunari Murakami

GHC Heavyweight Championship
Kenta Kobashi def. Masahiro Chono

NWF/IWGP Heavyweight Championships
Yoshihiro Takayama def. Yuji Nagata

New Japan's 31st birthday party stood in stark contrast to its 30th. 2002's anniversary show had a varied feel perhaps even more suited to the 'package wrestling' tag than All Japan was. Ultimate Crush had a more defined direction, although its dual focuses were still at odds with one another.

The Ultimate Crush concept was to present two cards in one night. Traditional pro wrestling was to top and tail the event, while MMA was the meat in the wrestling sandwich, with five 'Ultimate Crush matches' promoted as New Japan versus Vale Tudo. These were fights consisting of three five-minute rounds, with participants wearing gloves and vertical spacers put on the ring ropes to prevent falls out the ring. Joining the broadcast of the show was Minoru Suzuki, lending insight on behalf of Pancrase and in the process returning to New Japan after a 14-year exile, having had his last MMA fight against Jushin Liger in November.

Jordan Breen
The thing here from an MMA perspective is that you had some world class fighters, just not in world class positions at all. Josh Barnett had left the UFC in controversy over steroid testing, but was considered by many to be one of the best fighters in the world, since he'd never actually lost the UFC heavyweight title. Jimmy Ambriz was nowhere near his level, so it hurt perceptions of the vale tudo idea from the outset.

The effect of all that is when you had a Manabu Nakanishi give Kazuyuki Fujita trouble, instead of getting behind Nakanishi, the MMA crowd was rueful. It was less a case of an underdog from an experience perspective getting in there, and more a case of fight fans saying Nakanishi could have been a big deal if only he had

trained in MMA from the get-go.

In a vacuum, the fights were decent displays. Barnett flattened Jimmy Ambriz with a knee, while Kazuyuki Fujita got a win despite being rattled by Manabu Nakanishi after a nasty cut over Nakanishi's nose put a stop to proceedings. Lyoto Machida was likely not quite as dominant over Kengo Watanabe as New Japan would have liked as the match went to a points decision in his favour, but a pair of slaps and a handshake from Antonio Inoki nevertheless made it clear the founder's seal of approval was on him.

John Pollock
Machida had a relatively safe opponent in Watanabe, and Ambriz had only had success with opponents at a certain level. Barnett was in another league. It was an odd pairing to have these two Americans with not much cache to a Japanese MMA audience, but it would eventually set up Barnett's inroads to PRIDE.

On the surface, the Ultimate Crush idea was a wild success. When the dual format concept of the show was announced, ticket sales reportedly doubled. A combination of curiosity about genuine MMA matches on a New Japan card, and an apparently clear distinction between martial artistry and pro wrestling undeniably drew people in.

Nevertheless, the duality of the show was at best narratively distracting. 'These are the real fights,' it seemed to declare, rendering the rest of the show 'fake' by definition. Then, what of matches involving Ken Shamrock, finally in a New Japan ring six years after being earmarked for Shinya Hashimoto? Or Enson Inoue's face off with Kazunari Murakami? These were fighters primarily, but their matches weren't under the Ultimate Crush rules. Were they less valid martial artists than the others? Media at large, and *ShuPro* in particular were undecided on the whole idea; in one article praising the show as a 'resurrection for New Japan business in the Tokyo Dome' and questioning whether fans 'can really be expected to enjoy both styles… or if they do enjoy both, whether they can switch between the two so fluidly'[101]. Shinsuke Nakamura would later reflect on his match with Jan Nortje that 'it really didn't matter how the match went. It was a New Japan show, the people were there to see that, not MMA. All I knew was that if I lost (as a New Japan talent) I was toast.'[102]

Even disregarding this confusion, it felt the classical pro wrestling fans were forced to eat their MMA greens before getting to dessert. When

finally being passed their wrestling pudding, reactions from the crowd went from polite applause to raucous yells, with a pair of bouts that could justifiably be called dream matches.

After his time limit draw with Mitsuharu Misawa, Masahiro Chono had taken his final G1 Climax victory in 2002. Aside from a loss to Hiroyoshi Tenzan in January (Tenzan would beat Hiroshi Tanahashi in the Ultimate Crush opener to lead to a June IWGP title match), Chono was strong heading into another clash of a Musketeer and a King of Heaven.

This was Kenta Kobashi's first match in a New Japan ring meanwhile as Pro Wrestling NOAH continued to experience healthy growth. While not operating on as large a scale as New Japan, they had a healthy and growing following thanks to a continuation of the All Japan *oudou* style. To counteract the time limit draw that ended Misawa and Chono's 2002 match, this match would have no time limit, with a winner in the New Japan and NOAH feud being theoretically decided.

It would be a match of one upmanship. Early stalemates were broken by a long delayed vertical suplex by Kobashi to take control in flashy form. Kobashi and Chono would each try to powerbomb or piledrive the other on the entrance ramp, but both would be countered; Chono getting hit by a backdrop suplex and then outdoing Kobashi's reversal with a Frankensteiner later on.

Chono would hit increasingly vicious and dangerous looking backdrop suplexes in succession to Kobashi but was unable to put the champion away. Kobashi would then outdo Chono with a succession of half nelson suplexes. As Chono kicked out, Kobashi hit a pair of lariats and one more suplex to take the win for NOAH.

The main event was another match a year in the making. After 2002's explosive Yuji Nagata IWGP defense against Yoshihiro Takayama, the rematch had two titles on the line.

Nagata had held the title for 392 days and made ten defenses against pro wrestlers and fighters alike. The 'V10 road' was to that point the most successful IWGP reign in history, and the most demanding time of Nagata's career. Years later he would remark that 'It wasn't just the matches, but the amount of promotion, and introducing myself to potential sponsors. It was the hardest I've ever worked.'[103]

Takayama meanwhile had defended the NWF title three times since winning it, first against Ryushi Yanagisawa, and then against Scott Norton in New Japan and Takeshi Rikio in NOAH. With the latter two defenses being decidedly counter to the ‘real martial artists only’ concept of the title, the belt’s merits were unclear. Then again, this double title match had been teased since Takayama inaugurated the belt on January 4; it ultimately wasn't a surprise that the title would only have a one-year long shelf life.

The title match was the story of a hardened Takayama unwilling to make the same momentary lapse that gave Nagata his flash win one year earlier. In reference to Takayama’s now legendary fight with Don Frye the prior summer, the pair exchanged furious strikes, before the NWF champion used signature knees to great effect. Nagata would rally with a top rope exploder, but ultimately a knee strike followed by a big Everest German suplex made Takayama a double champion.

New Japan Pro Wrestling
NJPW Ultimate Crush II
October 13, 2003
Attendance 47,000

IWGP Junior Heavyweight Championship Rumble
Jado def. Dick Togo, El Samurai, Gedo, Heat, Jushin Thunder Liger, Katsushi Takemura, Koji Kanemoto, Masahito Kakihara, Masayuki Naruse & Tiger Mask

IWGP U-30 Openweight Championship #1 Contendership
Blue Wolf def. Yutaka Yoshie

TOA def. Shinya Makabe

Tadao Yasuda def. Osamu Nishimura

Ultimate Crush Rules
Osami Shibuya def. Khaliun Boldbaatar

Ultimate Crush Rules
Tsuyoshi Kohsaka def. Ricardon

Ultimate Crush Rules/ King of Pancrase Openweight Championship
Josh Barnett def. Yoshiki Takahashi

Kazunari Murakami ¥2,000,000 Bounty
Kazunari Murakami def. Katsuyori Shibata

Hulk Hogan def. Masahiro Chono

Ten Man Elimination Tag
Bob Sapp, Kazuyuki Fujita, Minoru Suzuki, Shinsuke Nakamura & Yoshihiro Takayama def. Hiroshi Tanahashi, Hiroyoshi Tenzan, Manabu Nakanishi, Seiji Sakaguchi & Yuji Nagata

Ultimate Crush II continued its predecessor's dual styled approach. Headlining the vale tudo side was a battle over the King of Pancrase

championship, the grand prize of a pioneer in Japanese MMA. What surprised about the pro wrestling meanwhile was just how many parallels, accidental or no, it had with the American scene.
In Ultimate Crush's top three matches, we had an elimination tag team match immediately before the WWE's Survivor Series event, a featured Hulk Hogan match months after he walked out of Vince McMahon's promotion, and a cash bounty over Kazunari Murakami that coincided with a cash sum on Bill Goldberg's head at the time in WWE.

Playing most directly into events Stateside was Hulk Hogan's first Tokyo Dome match in nearly a decade. Hogan had made a 2002 return to WWE after WCW folded, and quickly assumed a 'living legend' role within the company. After a television feud with Vince McMahon supposedly ended with the loss of his job, Hogan would reappear under a mask as Mr.America, a mysterious patriot who moved alarmingly similarly to the Hulkster.

At the end of June 2003 however, Hogan abruptly walked out of the company, citing creative differences, and not wanting to be treated as 'just another wrestler' instead of a special attraction in the waning days of his career.[104]The sudden departure left WWE to scramble, and abandon the Mr. America character by showing footage of Hogan removing his mask and posing for the live crowd after a TV taping ended. By using this as 'proof' that Hogan had reneged on his Wrestlemania match stipulation, it was a rare case of a company following through with an in-story firing.

In New Japan, Hogan would have the red carpet rolled out for him and receive a healthy payout to boot. Hogan would talk up challenging for the IWGP title, and promotion would focus on his famous defeat of Antonio Inoki two decades earlier to win the inaugural IWGP tournament (before the championship was a regularly contended belt), keeping the doors open for such a possibility.

For now though, Masahiro Chono was the only New Japan regular with a big enough name value and long enough history to live up to a Tokyo Dome dream match billing opposite Hogan. The parallels between Hogan and Chono, especially in the nWo heyday, were obvious, and the match was promoted as a 'clash of charisma'; Chono stating 'He's Mr. America? Then he has to go through Mr.Japan.' In practice, the bout had less connection to the wild heady Stan Hansen Dome brawl in 1990, and more in common with Hogan's recent American nostalgia tour. A largely eventless match, it peaked with Hogan hitting an Ax Bomber to Chono and sending him flying off the

apron in a reference to the move which knocked out Inoki to grant him his 1983 upset IWGP win by countout.
This time Chono managed to get back to the ring, only to contend with Hogan 'Hulking up'. While Chono could withstand Hogan's American leg drop finish, he wasn't impervious to his Japanese Ax Bomber in the middle of the ring, and Hogan was victorious.

Ultimately, this was one and done for Hogan, and in line with Bob Sapp and Joanie Laurer, another criticised expensive import of a major name. Hogan's IWGP title challenge was left dangling in the wind, as was the follow-up to a post-match altercation with Jeff Jarrett.

In the wake of WCW's collapse, Jarrett had formed a new company, Total Nonstop Action, with the aid of the National Wrestling Alliance. TNA would see the NWA name return somewhat to the public eye, as the fledgling promotion garnered a cult following in America through 2002 and 2003.

NJPW saw some value to rekindling their relationship with the NWA. In particular, the NWA and TNA were seen as an opportunity to leverage some gain from the LA Dojo[105]. As the Dojo's big name of Shinsuke Nakamura took to the main event at Ultimate Crush II, the Santa Monica setup was becoming home to some of the best and brightest American talent of the early 20th century.

Yet as Samoa Joe, CM Punk, Bryan Danielson and many more had their bigger money-making years ahead of them, the dojo was costing the company in the region of 3 million Yen (approx. 27,000 USD) every month just in terms of upkeep[106]. A tie up with the NWA would allow for talent exchange between Japan and the US and gain more exposure for the occasional shows being run from the Dojo itself.

Meanwhile TNA were aggressively courting Hogan, and Hogan was playing ball enough to suggest an interest in the NWA heavyweight championship in interviews. Thus Jeff Jarrett made the flight to Japan purely to whack Hogan with a guitar during his post-match interview. While NJPW would have a relationship gradually blooming over the coming years with NWA/TNA, Hogan didn't. A planned Hogan and Jarrett match in TNA fell through as Hogan carried nagging injuries, and when he recovered, Hogan would appear in WWE, not TNA.

Had Hogan's desire for an IWGP title match come to pass, it would have led to a battle of imposing blonds as Hogan would have faced

Yoshihiro Takayama. Takayama had retained his NWF and IWGP titles over the summer, including against Hiroyoshi Tenzan, but as Tenzan won the G1 Climax in August, the two were destined to meet again. In fact, the Tenzan Takayama match was set and announced for Ultimate Crush II, before plans changed.

As doubts lingered over whether Tenzan was able to bring in crowds at a Tokyo Dome main event level, Takayama announced that his earlier defence against the New Japan stalwart was too easy, and that he 'wasn't the least bit nervous' about the proposed Ultimate Crush date. Takayama would refuse the match, with Inoki's backing, leading to anger from the anti Inoki-ists. Once again as the Inoki-ism vs traditional pro wrestling battle played out in ring, Inoki would lead a team of five against co-founder Seiji Sakaguchi returning to the ring with a team of his own.

Joining Takayama and the LA Dojo combination of Nakamura and Kazuyuki Fujita on Inoki's side would be Bob Sapp returning to New Japan, and Minoru Suzuki, who had returned to pro wrestling for New Japan in June. 'I promised myself that if I was going back to pro wrestling, I had to make it to a main event spot within a year, or I'd quit,' Suzuki would later reflect, but within three months, he challenged for Takayama's NWF title, making quick work of his goal. This match would set the seeds for Suzuki's later No Fear tag team with Takayama, a pairing he likened to 'A Japanese version of foreign bruisers, like (Stan) Hansen and (Bruiser) Brody'.[107]

With the IWGP title match now set for November in Yokohama Arena, Tenzan was an obvious pick for Sakaguchi's side, as was former champion Yuji Nagata and Manabu Nakanishi to continue his feud with Fujita. Hiroshi Tanahashi meanwhile was now in the main event mix after a gatekeeping match with Nakanishi earlier in the year. Tanahashi was the face of New Japan's youth at this point, and as such was the inaugural IWGP U-30 champion, the Young Lion Cup concept being applied to a full time belt.

The spectacle of the match certainly made for a better main event to Ultimate Crush II, especially after Chono and Hogan had left the crowd somewhat flat. Tenzan and Takayama would eliminate one another thanks to the over the top rope rule used in New Japan elimination matches. Suzuki would ultimately beat Nagata to ensure victory for Inoki's side, with Bob Sapp still protected with survival in the match.

Tanahashi was given a big moment during the bout with a flash rollup on Fujita to eliminate him. The good-looking youngster was eliminated by Sapp, but definitely made it out of the Tokyo Dome in better shape (and better looking) than Katsuyori Shibata.

Shibata found himself facing Kazunari Murakami, both men out from under their masks in a battle of Makai Club members. Naoya Ogawa's arrogant former partner put up a bounty on his own head to anyone who thought they could beat him. Starting at one million Yen, the idea was that with every win Murakami, would double the bounty (though the idea would be dropped at the end of the year after three matches, so presumably it was limited by Murakami's own finances).

Here though, Shibata stepped up and was quickly knocked down. After an early shot from Murakami, Shibata was cut, and cut badly. The wild Murakami hammered home kicks to a defenseless Shibata, who rolled out of the ring leaking blood. Eventually Murakami would plead with his former partner to stay down as Shibata desperately tried to claw at his opponent before the referee finally stopped a brief but powerful and dramatic match.

Shinya Makabe had also fallen victim to Murakami earlier in the summer, before falling again to TOA at Ultimate Crush. A Kiwi powerlifter, Paul Kingi had received overtures from the WWF during the mid 1990s but turned down a developmental deal, securing a stunt K-1 fight against Nakanishi. Under his Maori warrior TOA persona, Kingi crafted a super heavyweight novelty fighter persona not unlike Butterbean in the US. This fit the New Japan mould at the time, and he would wrestle a few matches for NJPW, mostly coming out on top.

For Makabe, it was yet another frustration as his career struggled to gain traction. Often sent as a sacrificial lamb to NOAH, he would be high up on those cards in high profile losses, only to come back in New Japan and find himself down the card.[108]

It felt watching Ultimate Crush II that the Ultimate Crush rules vale tudo matches in the middle of the show represented a clear break between the important programs in New Japan at the time, and lowercase talent barely given a second thought. Makabe was low on the list of priorities, as was the junior heavyweight championship, vacated by Tiger Mask in October so that it could be contested in a New Japan rumble match, 12 wrestlers entering in two-minute interviews and rushed in and out, Jado ultimately winning a title that was a long way removed from its mid 90s heyday.

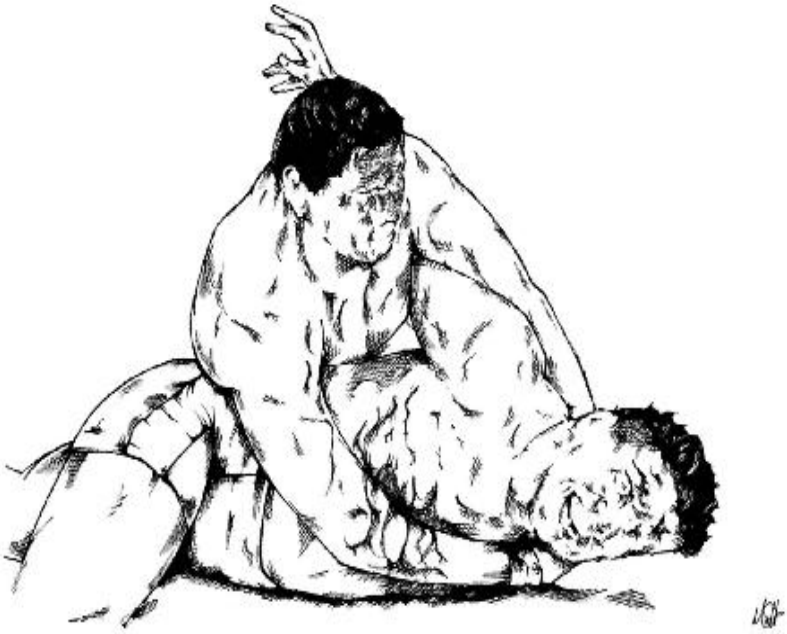
Those Ultimate Crush matches themselves were much less of an attraction this time as opposed to the novelty they presented in the spring. Headlined by Josh Barnett defending the King of Pancrase championship against Yoshiki Takahashi, they again were lopsided offerings with little to offer the MMA fans while breaking up the pro wrestling action.

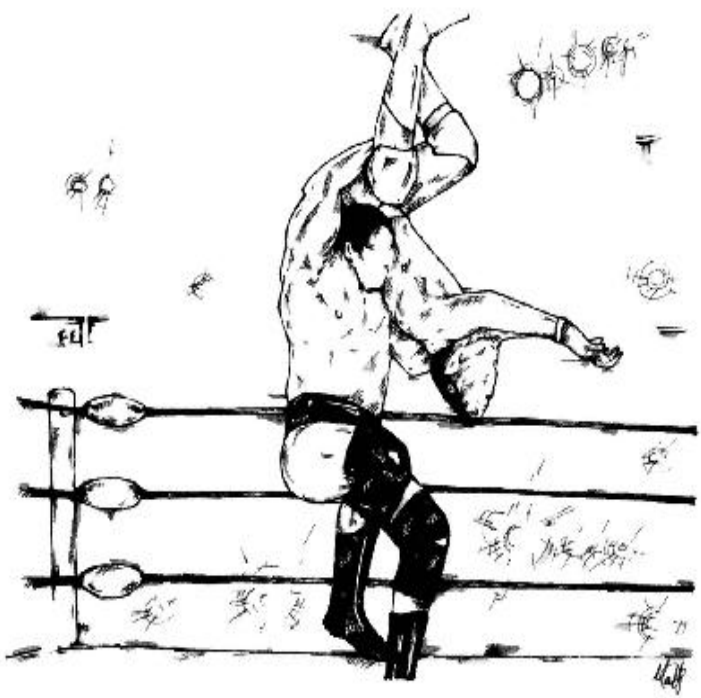
John Pollock
There was a huge size disparity between Barnett and Takahashi, and Takahashi was nowhere near a heavyweight. He was facing a larger and a more skilled opponent both standing and off his back in Barnett, and he secured a triangle easily.

Jordan Breen
By the second of these Ultimate Crush shows, the variety had definitely gone, and the timing was just off, especially from a western MMA perspective. In Japan there was still fluidity in starting in a pro wrestling dojo and going into MMA, and the whole back and forth, but in the west in 2003, you were starting to get guys like Rich Franklin that were starting to train specifically to go into MMA. It was MMA prospects as MMA prospects rather than 'how would this jiu jitsu guy fare in a different environment?' To an MMA fan, MMA wasn't and isn't the means to an end, it's the end itself. That doesn't sit with Inoki-ism, because Inoki's mindset was that being a great shooter isn't the end itself. That's where the cognitive dissonance to people who were MMA viewers comes in, where Inoki was using legitimate fighting as a promotional gimmick, or a feather in the cap for guys like Shinsuke Nakamura rather than having good fighters be good fighters.

Ultimate Crush II was down in attendance from the first and shows rounding out the year would continue to underperform. In contrast to the 1997 peak business of 4 billion Yen in sales, 2003 reports had business down to just under the 3 billion mark and approaching a state of free fall[109]. The damaging effects of Inoki-ism were approaching their nadir, but New Japan's next big show would be rescued by some big returns.

2004





New Japan Pro Wrestling
NJPW Wrestling World 2004
January 4, 2004
Attendance 53,000

Hirooki Goto def. Naofumi Yamamoto

Katsushi Takemura def. El Samurai

Makai Club (Makai 1, Mitsuya Nagai, Ryota Chikuzen & Ryushi Yanigasawa) def. Crazy Dogs (Enson Inoue, Hiro Saito, Michiyoshi Ohara & Tatsutoshi Goto)

Shinya Makabe & Toru Yano def. Blue Wolf & Wataru Inoue

Masayuki Naruse def. Tadao Yasuda

Ryusuke Taguchi def. Akiya Anzawa

IWGP Junior Heavyweight Tag Team Championships
Jado & Gedo def. Heat & Tiger Mask

GHC Junior Heavyweight Championship
Jushin Thunder Liger def. Takashi Sugiura

U-30 Openweight Championship
Hiroshi Tanahashi def. Yutaka Yoshie

Josh Barnett & Takashi Iizuka def. Makai Club (Katsuyori Shibata & Kazunari Murakami)

Osamu Nishimura def. Minoru Suzuki

Manabu Nakanishi def. Genichiro Tenryu

Yuji Nagata def. Kensuke Sasaki

Bob Sapp & Keiji Muto def. Hiroyoshi Tenzan & Masahiro Chono

IWGP/NWF Heavyweight Championships
Shinsuke Nakamura def. Yoshihiro Takayama

2002 had seen mass departures from New Japan, but the grass wasn't necessarily greener on the other side. Specifically, Riki Choshu's World Japan project had proved an abject disaster.

Budgets for WJ shows were astronomically high, with high production values, and a roster of talent that included Genichiro Tenryu, Vader, the Road Warriors, Steve Williams and more.

In the crowded pro wrestling and combat sports space, WJ couldn't find a foothold, and what audiences went to the shows didn't see anything that stood out in the contemporary space. After Choshu abandoned New Japan because of the Inoki-ist influence on that product, he would then book his own K-1 influenced WJ show, called X-1, in September.

The show, mainly populated by American fighters unfamiliar to the Yokohama audience, tanked. Less than a year in business, WJ was financially struggling, unable to pay its wrestlers[110]. Sasaki would step up for Choshu, using his family savings to help WJ make it through the next few shows.

Sasaki and Choshu's long, almost paternal relationship was destroyed by WJ's financial issues, with Choshu allegedly refusing to pay back a loan he regarded as a donation to company coffers.[111] The two put aside differences for one night when Wrestle-1 was briefly revived in 2005, but a poor match with an uncooperative Choshu saw Sasaki part ways with his former mentor again. While both would enjoy some success as mainstream media stars on panel and variety TV shows, they would never appear on the same programme.

Sasaki, then, was a freelance wrestler in 2004. Together with Tenryu and WJ teenage prodigy Katsuhiko Nakajima, Sasaki would wrestle in promotions as varied as All Japan, Michinoku Pro, DDT and Dragon Gate, now rebranded from Toryumon. A rare case for an independent, Sasaki would be named Tokyo Sports newspaper's MVP in pro

wrestling for 2004, a year which he started opposite Yuji Nagata. Sasaki and Tenryu were presented as villainous turncoats as they returned to New Japan, which automatically set them up for matches against Nagata and Manabu Nakanishi as the NJPW loyalists.

Both bouts shared a similar theme, heated brawls that ended in surprisingly classical finishes. For Nakanishi and Tenryu, chops were exchanged in and out of the ring for roughly four of the match's ten minutes, before Nakanishi showed his power and Tenryu his roughhousing technique. After Tenryu was still vertical after two lariats though, it was a surprising Nakanishi bridging fisherman's suplex that secured the win.

Nagata and Sasaki was a similar style of match, with passion and violence turned up to 11. Nagata would be quick to fire in slaps to Sasaki's face, to which the freelancer would respond in kind. As the match spilled out of the ring though, steel chair and ring post conspired to make both men bloody. The bout continued in such gruesome form as to recall the Hiroshi Hase and Keiji Muto bloodbaths of yesteryear, Nagata ultimately sinking in a chicken wing that Sasaki passed out to from the loss of blood.

Sasaki and Tenryu's return wasn't the only one borne out of financial issues. All Japan's 'package' concept was struggling to gain ground, with the promotion lacking the visibility to appeal to a broad audience, and many hardcore fans finding it too Americanised. Amid dwindling attendance and high building fees, AJPW would run their last show at the Nippon Budokan that had long been their home arena in February. For Keiji Muto and other All Japan talent, cooperation with other companies was a necessity for survival, and Muto would wrestle in NOAH and Zero-One in the coming months.

For Wrestling World though, he was to wrestle his first New Japan match in two years. With his appearance set to be a one off for the time being, however, he wasn't afforded the big singles match return of Sasaki or Tenryu. Instead the Wrestle-1 connection with Bob Sapp lent an air of the turncoat opposing company president teaming with a gun for hire against the established ChoTen tag team in the opposite corner.

Bob Sapp was in line for big things in the spring, meanwhile, and so was given a heavy focus in the tag match. With most clamouring for Muto and Chono locking horns once again, the delay of that gratification coupled with the preceding bloodbath sucked the air out

of the crowd in the early going. When Muto did tag in, the two old rivals exchanged Shining Wizards to a big reaction; in the end it was Bob Sapp on top though as Sapp hit his own Shining Wizard and a huge powerbomb to Tenzan for a declarative win.

What was perhaps surprising about the majority of Wrestling World, with moments of the five-match preshow (which saw the Tokyo Dome debuts of Hirooki Goto and future Yoshitatsu Naofumi Yamamoto) excepted, was the virtual absence of MMA pretensions. Its biggest matches played to pro wrestling audiences between pro wrestlers.

Even the junior heavyweights, long neglected in the building, were focused on. Jado and Gedo would retain their IWGP tag team titles, after a double powerbomb and Gedo Superfly splash to singles junior champion Heat. The masked Minoru Tanaka had declared he wanted to prove that the IWGP Junior Heavyweight championship represented the junior heavyweight peak; his next challenger would be perennial midcard challenger Katsushi Takemura who interfered throughout on Jado and Gedo's behalf.

Heat and Takemura would have a hard time outperforming NOAH's GHC junior championship matches. Wrestling World saw the first time the GHC junior title was defended in New Japan, with champion Takashi Sugiura against Jushin Thunder Liger. Sugiura would go on to become a bruising, imposing heavyweight, and brought a rare powerhouse feel to his junior title matches. Liger was no exception, Sugiura catching a Liger baseball slide into a brutal gutwrench suplex on the ramp. Liger would counter an Olympic slam with a Ligerbomb on the entrance ramp before hitting a top rope brainbuster to capture the 28th championship of his career and start his sole GHC title reign.

Main eventing in the midst of his first championship reign was Shinsuke Nakamura. After the plug had been pulled on Tenzan's Tokyo Dome IWGP title shot, the match was pushed to a November Yokohama Arena show. The card performed badly, so much so that New Japan wouldn't return to the building for 11 years. A good portion of the blame for the thin crowd could be levied on a theme of K-1 rules matches, a stone's throw away and two months removed from WJ's X-1 debacle. Yet pressure was put upon the main eventers. After a long journey to the title, Tenzan would relinquish the IWGP championship in December.

Nakamura winning the belt was a huge moment for the Supernova. At 23, he became the youngest IWGP champion in history, and after only

15 months in wrestling, Nakamura was saddled with enormous responsibility, not to mention distrust and contempt from his peers. Pivoting from the LA Dojo crew, Nakamura would align himself with Chono and Tenzan, pledging to beat Takayama and unify his title with the Inoki-ist NWF belt.

Nakamura, complete with shiner and visibly hurting from his appearance in K-1's Dynamite event days earlier would play decided underdog in the match. Constantly trying to shoot in on Takayama, he would be swatted and kneed away by the bigger man. A Shining Wizard style triangle would be countered by an enormous powerbomb by the NWF champion, who took control on Nakamura for over ten minutes. The number of Nakamura offensive moves could be counted on one hand before an Everest German suplex from Takayama was countered into a Kimura for a submission win by the young star.

Nakamura had unified the NWF and IWGP titles, but his grimaces in pain were not merely part of the show and owed to Takayama's punishment. On December 31, Nakamura fought Belarusian super heavyweight K-1 World Grand Prix champion Alexey Ignashov to a no contest. The dual fighting and pro wrestling schedule was taking its toll, and Nakamura would vacate his titles in February due to several nagging injuries.

Nakamura was the ultimate cross sports champion for New Japan, and while a young man to be put in such a high-pressure spot, hopes were pinned on him to revive business by fans, sponsors and broadcasters TV Asahi. Nakamura's injury was a severe black mark on the concept of pushing New Japan wrestlers into MMA fights.

All this, and Nakamura was actually counter programming on the part of New Japan, an extra bird in the hand as Inoki's MMA dreams were once again dealt a blow elsewhere. The annual New Year's Eve Bom-Ba-Ye cards had been ratings successes in the era of cooperation between Inoki, K-1 and Dream Stage/PRIDE management. Now though, each company had gone their separate ways, and Bom-Ba-Ye 2003 had stiff competition.

Suddenly the holiday MMA space was very crowded. Bom-Ba-Ye on NTV was programmed opposite K-1 Premium Dynamite! on TBS and PRIDE *Otoko Matsuri* (yes, "Man Festival") on Fuji TV. Nakamura's presence was a safeguard, ensuring some New Japan TV exposure even if people didn't tune into Inoki's show.

Tune in they didn't. With an awesome peak of 43% audience share and averaging 19.5%, K-1 won the New Year's Eve TV ratings battle. Inoki, without K-1 or DSE's fighters to help garnered a poor 5.1% on a show that, incidentally, again placed Yuji Nagata in a dangerous spot, hopelessly outclassed by a top-flight fighter in Fedor Emelianenko. As the show didn't meet ratings targets, NTV didn't fully pay out the contracted rights fees to Inoki and declined to broadcast another event.

That wasn't all. The event was produced and bankrolled by Seiya Kawamata, former owner of famous Roppongi nightspot Maharaja. After the show, Kawamata headed overseas without paying the fighters, and leaving Inoki to foot the bill. That November, New Japan would sue Kawamata for the payoffs to company talent that had appeared on Bom-Ba-Ye[112], and the company wouldn't see the money until January 2005[113]. Bom-Ba-ye, in both success and failure, seemed little but injurious to New Japan's bottom line.

New Japan Pro Wrestling
NJPW Nexess
May 3, 2004
Attendance: 50,000

American Dragon, Ultimo Dragon & Koji Kanemoto def. Heat, Naomichi Marufuji & Tiger Mask

Makai Club (Giant Majin, New Strong Majin & Super Strong Majin) def. Hiroyoshi Tenzan, Osamu Nishimura & Shinya Makabe

Jushin Thunder Liger def. Katsuhiko Nakajima

Josh Barnett def. Ken Shamrock

Dolgorsuren Serjbudee & Dolgorsuren Sumyaabazar def. Genichiro Tenryu & Meng

Kendo Kashin & Yuji Nagata def. Kensuke Sasaki & Manabu Nakanishi

IWGP Tag Team Championships

No Fear (Minoru Suzuki & Yoshihiro Takayama) def. Kazunari Murakami & Masahiro Chono

MMA Rules
Yutaka Yoshie def. Jan Nortje

Hiroshi Tanahashi def. Sean O'Haire

MMA Rules
Musashi def. Katsuyori Shibata

IWGP Heavyweight Championship
Bob Sapp def. Shinsuke Nakamura

Wrestling World 2004 may have been in the shadow of an ill-fated Bom-Ba-Ye, but on the whole seemed a move forward for an increasingly embattled New Japan. After it seemed the promotion's outings in the Dome were mired in the pro wrestling versus MMA narrative both in front and behind the scenes, New Japan started the year with a strong, pro wrestling heavy show.

At the top of the card, Shinsuke Nakamura being positioned as the face of NJPW and pro wrestling at large felt like the beginning of a new era with a young star that showed hints of a burning inner charisma. Yet Nakamura's victory was a pyrrhic one. Jumping from his demanding New Year's Eve fight straight to a full time touring schedule, Nakamura would struggle, and then fail a physical in early February.[114] Nakamura's subsequent departure would lead to a game of hot potato with the IWGP title.

Nakamura's elevation to the fore had come at the expense of Hiroyoshi Tenzan, whose years of dedication had been rewarded with only a brief one-month IWGP reign. In a one-night tournament in Ryogoku on February 15, Tenzan would defeat outsiders Kensuke Sasaki and Genichiro Tenryu to hold the belt once more. His frustrating stop-start would continue though, as he fell to Sasaki on March 12. In turn, Bob Sapp would beat Sasaki 16 days later. Not a year removed from Yuji Nagata's ten title defenses over 392 days, there were four champions in an eight-week span.

Bob Sapp was still undoubtedly a famous man in early 2004, although the peak of his celebrity had passed somewhat. His charisma and size weren't in question either, but who a Sapp title reign benefitted was

more mysterious. The Beast's status as a K-1 import created a New Japan versus K-1 narrative to Nexess, a narrative that was rejected by a small Yokohama Arena crowd back in November. At least Nexess promised a returning Nakamura, back to seize control of the new era he initiated in January.

The Sapp match followed on directly from Nakamura's defeat of Takayama in January. This time the youngster would shoot in on the bigger man and often come out on top before Sapp finally took over. Nakamura got a rise out of fans for kicking out of a Beast Bomb at one, but would be hit by another immediately after, and would stay down.

The magazines the next week would call for pro wrestling to 'find its feet!'[115],but this was no mere call for valiant warriors to fight for justice. There was an air of desperation as New Japan's champion was still a promotional tool for another company operating in another medium. Tenzan and Nakamura's respective rises were both stalled to promote Sapp, who ultimately didn't even lose the IWGP title in a New Japan ring; instead K-1 used the IWGP title in promoting a fight with Kazuyuki Fujita. Fujita legitimately beat Sapp, who relinquished the IWGP title, making it vacant for the second time in a year.

Akio 'Musashi' Mori would also emerge victorious from Nexess, at the expense of Katsuyori Shibata, who was also struggling to gather steam. New Japan versus K-1 stood in stark contrast to the UWFi feud just under a decade prior; this wasn't a case of the strong New Japan heroes being consistently victorious on home turf. Instead home talent was presented as inferior to fighters with little to no pro wrestling experience.

Bucking that trend on both sides of the ring was Hiroshi Tanahashi's win over Sean O'Haire. O'Haire was fresh off a run with WWE, but was on the Nexess card as a K-1 fighter rather than a New Japan wrestler. The former WCW talent was training for MMA and kickboxing matches with the promotion starting in November, though his performance against Tanahashi was very different to the other K-1 charges in New Japan. Had O'Haire landed the swanton bomb he tried to use at Nexess in his K-1 fights, he may not have had a 0-4 career record. As it was, Tanahashi made the most of the missed top rope attempt and used a Dragon sleeper to win by submission.

As Nakamura's character aligned itself with the New Japan pro wrestlers in defiance of the Inoki-ist fighters, he, Tanahashi and

Shibata were earmarked as the three to carry NJPW into a more prosperous era. As the three started to be labelled New Japan's 'new three musketeers', Tanahashi was placed in the role of the 'new' Keiji Muto. A devotee of Muto's since his dojo days, announcers would frequently call Tanahashi the 'modern Genius' in reference to Muto's 'Wrestling Genius' nickname, while his Dragon sleeper was a mark of reverence to Tatsumi Fujinami, and the generation before Muto.

The three young prospects were certainly given prime positions on the Nexess cards, but with opponents and situations that couldn't elevate them, it was a tall order to get shrinking audiences to believe. Meanwhile, mid card matches like a Josh Barnett and Ken Shamrock affair showed a return to stodgy MMA styled grappling mixed with pro wrestling in the middle of the card. This style, that Ultimate Crush and the NWF championships had both been devised to try to phase out, or at least segment into a specific part of the card, was met with silence by the crowd who also saw a flat finish as guest referee Black Cat was shoved down and the match was thrown out.

In the ensuing bustle, both Shamrock and Barnett would take to the microphone to challenge one another to a 'Hanoi Deathmatch' that was sure to see a winner. The grandest stage at New Japan's disposal being used to set up a later match seemed strange, but stranger was that the Hanoi Deathmatch would never take place. Nor would any match between Shamrock and Barnett in New Japan or anywhere else. This would be both men's last match in the promotion; Barnett would head to PRIDE, while Shamrock returned to the UFC, Nexess being his last pro wrestling match bar a pair of one off appearances for TNA and Juggalo Championship Wrestling.

The outsider pairing of Kensuke Sasaki and Genichiro Tenryu were lower down the card than at Wrestling World. Sasaki would team up with a Manabu Nakanishi defying his friend Yuji Nagata, who would seek an alliance with former G-EGGS stablemate Kendo Kashin. It was a more bizarre Kashin though, who irritated Nagata with high five tags, and getting Nagata a tainted win with powder in the eyes of Nakanishi.

Tenryu meanwhile would team with a fellow middle aged hardman in Tonga Fifita for one night only; Tonga would reprise the Meng character he had used in WCW (and New Japan by extension) through the 1990s, though he would return to his more feared King Haku persona when sons Tama Tonga and Tanga Loa brought him back to New Japan years later. The Tenryu and Meng pairing would fall to the

Mongolian Dolgorsuren brothers; the more experienced Serjbudee losing his typical Blue Wolf persona for one night for a celebrity rub, as the team's brother Dagvadorj was making headlines for a dominant run in sumo at the time.

As a trivia note, Nexess did see the youngest pro wrestler to ever appear in the Tokyo Dome. Sasaki would introduce the WJ prodigy Katsuhiko Nakajima to the company, and he wrestled a brief strike heavy match with Jushin Liger. Nakajima had just turned 16 and would go on to appear in the Best of the Super Juniors tournament in 2004, as well as New Japan's Young Lion's Cup, ultimately losing to tournament winner Ryusuke Taguchi.

Nexess was an unremarkable show in demanding times for New Japan. Management would again be thrown into chaos in the early autumn as Fujinami would step down as president of the company. As NJPW forewent their autumn Tokyo Dome show to regroup for January 4, they were crashing toward a business low as a rival was about to reach their peak.

Pro Wrestling NOAH
NOAH Departure 2004
July 10, 2004
Attendance 58,000

Mitsuo Momota def. Haruka Eigen

Jun Izumida, Tamon Honda & Tsuyoshi Kikuchi def. Kishin Kawabata, Masao Inoue & Masashi Aoyagi

KAOS (Donovan Morgan & Michael Modest) def. Kotaro Suzuki & Ricky Marvin

KAOS (Richard Slinger & Scorpio) def. Akitoshi Saito & Makoto Hashi

Akira Taue & Takuma Sano def. Daisuke Ikeda & Mohammed Yone

GHC Junior Heavyweight Tag Team Championships
KENTA & Naomichi Marufuji def. Kendo Kashin & Takashi Sugiura

GHC Junior Heavyweight Championship
Yoshinobu Kanemaru def. Jushin Thunder Liger

IWGP Tag Team Championships
No Fear (Minoru Suzuki & Yoshihiro Takayama) def. Wild

Two (Takeshi Morishima & Takeshi Rikio)

GHC Tag Team Championships
Mitsuharu Misawa & Yoshinari Ogawa def. Keiji Muto & Taiyo Kea

GHC Heavyweight Championship
Kenta Kobashi def. Jun Akiyama

The pro wrestling medium in Japan was approaching a long winter period, away from the mainstream and with ever smaller crowds. This was the case for New Japan at least, but for Pro Wrestling NOAH, staying with the *Oudou* style and appealing to hardened wrestling fans, there was a bigger slice of an overall smaller pie; NOAH would catch and then pass New Japan for market share in the mid 2000s.

Over each promotion's respective 2004/2005 reporting periods (admittedly spanning different times, with each company reporting sales after their biggest tours in order to inflate numbers as much as possible and ensure the monthly earnings chart skewed upward), New Japan would see record low sales of 1.36 billion Yen (11.5 million USD), while NOAH set a new high of 1.58 billion (13.4 million USD) [116]

The result was a bullish company seeking to take their blend of old school All Japan style wrestling with modern production values to the Tokyo Dome. Successfully, as well; NOAH would report a sellout and in practice were close to it, despite some high rolling ticket prices compared to New Japan at the time. Spectators in the front row had put down 30,000 Yen (250 USD) for the privilege of being spat on by Rikidozan's son Mitsuo Momota as the taste was slapped out of him by fellow veteran Haruka Eigen in the opener.

As Momota and Eigen continued to do battle at 55 and 58, Rusher Kimura bowed out at Departure via a video address. Kimura had been in bloody battles with Giant Baba in JWA in the 1960s. As part of IWE in the wake of the JWA's collapse, Kimura had helped pioneer the modern deathmatch style, and was also part of New Japan's first invasion angle, hopping into a feud with Antonio Inoki. Kimura would go from New Japan to the original UWF to All Japan, where he found a penchant for comedy and extended his career through humourous promos. He was a founder member of the NOAH roster, but retired in declining health.

Yet this wasn't a show trading on nostalgia, nor were the fans drawn to the Dome for familiar names. A warm crowd turned hot when getting behind 26-year-old Kotaro Suzuki and 23 year old Ricky Marvin in a bout that ultimately set up Donovan Morgan and Mike Modest as GHC Junior tag challengers. They stayed hot when watching those junior tag belts being defended by two of the hottest rising stars anywhere in wrestling at the time.

Still only 24 at the time, Naomichi Marufuji had already wrestled in the Tokyo Dome for All Japan. His partner had supported NOAH members from ringside at New Japan Dome shows, but this was his wrestling debut in the building. Kenta Kobayashi had trained in the All Japan dojo, and debuted opposite Marufuji in mid 2000, but would join the mass exodus to NOAH mere weeks later. A protege of Kenta Kobashi, he would join Kobashi's Burning unit; as a seal of his mentor's approval, and to avoid confusion, he would be rechristened with the always romanized (and always all caps) KENTA.

The subsequent MaruKEN tag team would be the first GHC junior tag champions. Through a year with the belts, they would be all the thing that the junior division in New Japan had lacked of late. They were innovative, hard hitting and, importantly for a female audience that was much larger in Misawa's promotion than Fujinami's, very good looking. As NOAH official Ryu Nakata would put it after the show 'Women at New Japan shows are there because their boyfriends drag them there. Our female fans are here because they're fans'.[117]

In Takashi Sugiura they had a powerful base to play off of, and Sugiura's surprise partner added some levity. Kendo Kashin was by now an All Japan based gun for hire by any promotion that would have him, although his appearances would only serve to grief his partners. Kashin would stop Sugiura from getting a countout win after a spectacular gutwrench suplex from the apron to Marufuji, but had no qualms killing KENTA's momentum with a kick below the belt.

The roar of approval from the audience as Marufuji hit a top rope Shiranui for the win was confirmation that appreciation for NOAH's youth was not reserved for the hardcore. This was made all the clearer as Yoshinobu Kanemaru won the GHC Junior Heavyweight title with rolling brainbusters on Jushin Liger, and as the crowd got heavily behind 25 year old Takeshi Morishima with his former sumo wrestler partner Takeshi Rikio.

Wild Two would challenge Minoru Suzuki and Yoshihiro Takayama, who had taken the IWGP Tag belts early in the spring. Takayama regularly wrestled in NOAH and brought Suzuki in for his debut in the promotion.

Takayama was imposing and Suzuki a wicked brand of cunning. Confident and comfortable, Suzuki was a long way removed from admitting to leaning on Takayama as he returned to pro wrestling ('he told me to just not think about anything, go at it as violently as I could and let him handle the rest,' Suzuki would remark[118]) and was tapping into the wicked streak he honed in Pancrase. Slipping out of reach of Morishima and Rikio, Suzuki would act cockier and cockier, making for Morishima's eventual assault all the sweeter for the Dome crowd. No Fear would retain after a frightening double Team sleeper suplex and a Takayama German, but Morishima was clearly on the ascent.

The two top billing matches had more established names, treated reverently. The possibility of Misawa clashing with Keiji Muto was dream match fodder to the NOAH faithful; the old and new of All Japan in a match that, as announcers informed us 'nobody would have thought possible when NOAH was conceived'. Muto and Misawa would never eventually have a singles confrontation, but the crowd was rabid for one, as Muto deliberately antagonized the NOAH president by using his Emerald Flowsion on partner Yoshinari Ogawa, quickly eating a Shining Wizard for his trouble. With his own move being used against his team, Misawa was out for vengeance, and eventually he and Ogawa would retain with a modified Pole Shift version of the Flowsion as NOAH stood tall.

NOAH coming out on top of All Japan, and the spotlight on youth served to keep dedicated fans happy while New Japan loyalists were frustrated by recent offerings. The main event would send anyone home delighted as Jun Akiyama and Kenta Kobashi would put on a classic.

Apart from one another in singles matches for nearly three years, Akiyama had righted a 0-11 record against Kobashi in an early NOAH Ariake Colosseum main event. Akiyama would seek to retain the slight momentum swing in his favour, refusing to let Kobashi re-enter the ring after an early flurry sent the GHC champion to the outside.

Once back in however, Kobashi would tenaciously cling to a headlock through repeated backdrop suplexes before showing his toughness as

the match escalated. A brainbuster off the apron was followed by an Akiyama exploder from the second rope to the floor as in the *Oudou* style, moves grew ever more dangerous and the match ever more violent. Eventually, Kobashi would land his rarely used Burning Hammer to retain his title. It was a match that in Kobashi's words 'showed pro wrestling fans the strength of pro wrestling' and earned Tokyo Sports' match of the year award at 2004's end.

Departure was a show that hinted at a bright future for NOAH, continuing an upward trend as its competitors fought to slow their descents. Truly NOAH's slice of the wrestling pie was getting larger and larger; the problem was that the dish itself continued to shrink.

2005

New Japan Pro Wrestling
NJPW Wrestling World 2005
January 4, 2005
Attendance 46,000

Jado & Gedo def. Katsushi Takemura & Wataru Inoue

IWGP Junior Heavyweight Championship Number One Contendership
Jushin Thunder Liger def. Koji Kanemoto

IWGP Junior Heavyweight Championship
Tiger Mask def. Heat

Amateur Wrestling Exhibition
Yuji Nagata def. Katsuhiko Nagata

Minoru Suzuki def. Takashi Iizuka

Satoshi Kojima def. Osamu Nishimura

Ultimate Royal UC Rules
Ron Waterman def. Masayuki Naruse
Manabu Nakanishi def. Toru Yano
Dolgorsuren Sumiyabazar def. Mitsuya Nagai
Yuji Nagata def. Blue Wolf
Ron Waterman def. Manabu Nakanishi
Yuji Nagata def. Dolgorsuren Sumiyabazar
Ron Waterman def. Yuji Nagata

Three Way Dogfight
Masahiro Chono def. Hiroyoshi Tenzan & Riki Choshu

IWGP U-30 Openweight Championship
Shinsuke Nakamura def. Hiroshi Tanahashi

Winter had come to Japanese pro wrestling. After New Japan's Nexess show in May 2004, the embattled Tatsumi Fujinami, struggling with competition from MMA promotions outside of pro wrestling and

NOAH within it, stepped down as president. ‘Whatever I did, however much I tried, things would go the opposite direction,’ Fujinami would ruefully recall years later.[119] Remaining on the director’s board, Fujinami was replaced by Seiichi Kusayama.

Kusayama was a result of New Japan actively searching for business directors from outside of the wrestling world. In the 1990s he would go between the US and Japan working for undergarment manufacturer Triumph International. Working as a management consultant, Kusayama would make Antonio Inoki’s acquaintance, and be invited into the New Japan role.[120]

He would declare an aim for his initial two-year contract with the company to reverse the promotion’s fortunes, cutting losses and getting New Japan operating in the black first, followed by a concerted bid to rebuild audiences. He would be joined by other new hires that came from outside the wrestling business, including Kenji Kato, who had worked in radio and unlike Kusuyama wasn't even a wrestling fan.

As the new corporate structure took stock of the goings on within the company, they saw cause for concern. Expenditure was high, with high fees for outside talent and a lot of money being sunk into the LA Dojo. More concerning was the view that the contemporary in-house roster at New Japan lacked name value. ‘We went through every name that was on the roster,’ Kato remarked, ‘(...)and I didn't recognise about 70 percent of the names. I knew Chono, had vaguely heard of Nakanishi. Nobody had name value, especially when it came to female fans.’[121]

The numbers appeared to bear that assessment out. Without heavily promoted guests or a strong drawing match on top of the card, attendance suffered. The company would announce 46,000 in the building for Wrestling World 2005, but with a combination of promotional exaggeration and a large number of ticket giveaways, estimates had the actual paid number at just 8,500.[122]

Wrestling World’s drawing power was also harmed by circumstance and some strange decisions. Riki Choshu, now a freelance performer post WJ, who had wrestled a few times for Dream Stage’s new HUSTLE promotion in 2004, was making a return to New Japan after nearly three years. Choshu was slotted opposite Masahiro Chono in a singles match, which played into Choshu’s comments on leaving that Chono wouldn't last long in his booking role. More current was Chono

again separating himself from the New Japan establishment, forming the New Japan Black stable in autumn that again brought dissatisfaction with management behind the scenes to the forefront in ring.

On December 13, a mere three weeks away from Wrestling World, IWGP champion Hiroyoshi Tenzan was inexplicably added to the match, making for an elimination style 'three-way dogfight'. Possible injuries and a lack of confidence in a singles match were at play, but the decision not only weakened the Chono and Choshu grudge match but also removed an IWGP title match from the card, Tenzan instead defending the belt against Triple Crown Champion Satoshi Kojima the next month in Ryogoku in what was a more exciting prospect as a main event.

If there were concerns about Choshu's physical ability, they were misplaced, as Choshu charged at Chono with Riki lariats early, before taking a piledriver from Chono and then delivering a huge top rope brainbuster. Still, Choshu didn't last long before being dispatched by Chono; more surprising was when Tenzan also fell, Chono kicking out of a Tenzan Tombstone and applying a stepping sleeper variation of his STF hold to submit the IWGP champion. With a champion versus champion match weeks away, Tenzan's loss was baffling, and reinforced the idea that the contemporary top names in New Japan couldn't get the job done.

Yuji Nagata seemed directionless in early 2005 after being on top of the card for so long. At Wrestling World, he took on double duty, first facing his younger brother Katsuhiko. The younger Nagata had taken silver in the Sydney Olympics in 2000 but wouldn't transition to New Japan, instead pivoting toward MMA. The brief amateur exhibition was without consequence and seemed somewhat flat.

Nagata's other outing on the show however was downright bizarre. The Ultimate Royal match was a meeting of fighters and the more amateur wrestling based New Japan talents like Toru Yano and Blue Wolf. It was in essence an eight person single elimination tournament with the twist being that every match happened simultaneously. Ending with UFC and Pancrase veteran Ron Waterman beating Nagata with an armbar, it was precisely as confusing as the concept would have one believe, and was met with silence live and ridicule afterward.

There were positive steps to be seen on the show. Jushin Thunder

Liger, returning to his all black outfit and leading the Control Terrorism Unit (CTU, Keifer Sutherland drama *24* being popular in Japan at the time) had an intense encounter with Koji Kanemoto. His huge Shotei palm strikes and a terrifying top rope German suplex to Kanemoto got a rise out of the crowd. Liger would beat Kanemoto to become number one contender to stablemate Heat's IWGP Junior Heavyweight Championship, though the former Minoru Tanaka would relinquish his title to Tiger Mask minutes later. Tiger Mask was moderately off kilter during the title bout, leading to a scary landing off a Heat release Tiger suplex, and at one point tumbling off the entrance ramp as the two teased a suplex. Still, the crowd was receptive to the new champion, and the subsequent Liger and Tiger match showed promise.

In place of a Tenzan IWGP title defence, Wrestling World was headlined by the U-30 championship. Hiroshi Tanahashi would have his first of a record nine singles main events in the Dome, opposite Shinsuke Nakamura. The two had won the IWGP tag titles together in December but Tanahashi would admit to being jealous of Nakamura's rocket ship elevation ('I was crushed,' Tanahashi would admit when asked about Nakamura's record setting IWGP win[123]) starting an iconic rivalry.

Their collision was inevitable, but delayed. The prior autumn, New Japan's Osaka Dome show was to be headlined by a match of the fans' choosing. Winning the poll was, indeed, Nakamura versus Tanahashi. Yet while hardcore fans wanted to see the match, ticket advances were poor. Two days before the show, Manabu Nakanishi and Kendo Kashin were added to make a tag match that nobody wanted to see, a case of Inoki booking cutting off the nose to spite the face.[124] Now, finally in their first singles match against one another, Tanahashi would lose the title he had held since its inception. It was a heated affair that started with Nakamura offering his hand, but would evolve into slaps from Tanahashi splitting the younger man's lip. Tanahashi's tope suicida, as well as Dragon suplexes weren't enough for the champion, who submitted as Nakamura transitioned from a rear naked choke into a cross armbreaker. Nakamura would talk after the match about 'shouldering the responsibility' of bringing New Japan back to the fore, though admitting '(Tanahashi) and I both need to evolve or there is no future here.'

Through it all, Katsuyori Shibata, an early Chono recruit into New Japan Black, was watching from ringside. Shibata said he 'wanted to see the future of New Japan', but there was more to his passive role

than met the eye. On January 25, Shibata officially withdrew from New Japan, announcing his last date would be on the 31st of the month. He was critical of New Japan in his departure saying 'the New Japan I wanted so badly to be a part of is not the company that's here now. It's in the ditch(…) I can't do the type of wrestling I want to do here. I can't be a salaryman wrestler'.[125]

So Nakamura and Tanahashi were two shining lights in a dark period for New Japan. The road to recovery would be a long one for the company, as 2005 continued to be a tumultuous year.

New Japan Pro Wrestling
NJPW Nexess VI
May 14, 2005
Attendance 35,000

Togi Makabe & Toru Yano def. Osamu Nishimura & Yutaka Yoshie

Minoru Suzuki def. Alexander Otsuka

IWGP Junior Heavyweight Tag Team Championships
CTU (Hirooki Goto & Minoru) def. Koji Kanemoto & Wataru Inoue

IWGP Junior Heavyweight Championship
Tiger Mask def. Black Tiger

Yuji Nagata def. Tsuyoshi Kohsaka

Keiji Muto def. Ron Waterman

IWGP Tag Team Championships
Hiroshi Tanahashi & Shinsuke Nakamura def. Team JAPAN
(Kendo Kashin & Manabu Nakanishi)

Mitsuharu Misawa & Tatsumi Fujinami def. Jushin Thunder
Liger & Masahiro Chono

IWGP Heavyweight Championship
Hiroyoshi Tenzan def. Satoshi Kojima

Card changes late on the road to Tokyo Dome shows had become a regular theme in New Japan. Nexess 6 would also have its main event swapped, but this time there was a more tragic note to the bump in the road.

'The idea was to team with (Keiji) Muto and (Shinya) Hashimoto. The three musketeers together for one last time. I was going to retire afterward,' Masahiro Chono recalled.[126]
Hashimoto had broken away from Zero-One in late 2004 after disputes with management and growing financial difficulties, working sporadically with Dream Stage and HUSTLE. Yet he was dealing with a shoulder injury and ongoing heart issues. Without a guarantee a six-man tag could take place, Muto was placed opposite Ron Waterman at Nexess while the identity of Chono's partner would be kept vague.

Days away from Nexess, Hashimoto officially withdrew, promising to Chono he'd regroup, start a new promotion in the autumn and have a documentary crew record his recovery. That musketeer reunion would take place by the end of the year.

Sadly, Hashimoto didn't have the luxury of time. On the morning of July 11, he began struggling for breath and slurring his speech. He was rushed to hospital, but a stroke was followed by heart failure and his death just a week after his 40th birthday.[127]

In place of Hashimoto, Jushin Liger would assume his Battle Liger heavyweight guise to join Chono, CTU having formed a partnership with New Japan Black. On the opposite side, Mitsuharu Misawa would team with Tatsumi Fujinami, making it a match of antiestablishment veterans taking on the current and former bosses of the country's biggest promotions. Fujinami got a Japanese rolling clutch on Liger to end a match that sucked the wind out of the crowd's sails somewhat, Misawa no longer having the novelty attraction on New Japan Dome shows, and the potentially legendary tag match being denied to the audience.

While Liger was denied a victory for CTU, his stablemates were more successful at Nexess. Minoru Tanaka, now free of the Heat mask, would team with Hirooki Goto, the stable giving the youngster a chance to graduate from the Young Lion ranks. Still clad in unadorned black tights and boots, Goto got the shock win with a sunset flip style powerbomb to net the IWGP Junior tag belts, which was presented as a major upset. Goto would get the entirety of post match focus from announcers and cameras, and it was clear he was being earmarked for something special.

Following on from Wrestling World, the junior heavyweights in general were receiving a greater focus. Tiger Mask's IWGP Junior title victory in January, and successful defenses against Liger thereafter served as the backdrop for a reintroduction of Rocky Romero, and a reinvigoration of a decades long feud. Romero would settle into the Black Tiger mask, the explanation being that as the current Tiger had been trained by the original, Satoru Sayama, so had the new Black Tiger been under the tutelage of Mark Rocco (this was true in Yoshihiro Yamazaki case, but embellished for Romero).

Rocky Romero
I was super nervous. Honestly, I kind of blacked out. I had the Black Tiger cape on, and it had snaps on it. Nobody had told me there were these velcro snaps on it and that's how it came off. Anyway, nobody told me I had pyro either. So the pyro went off and it scared the crap out of me, so I threw my hands up in the air and the cape fell. I felt like the goddamn Shockmaster. But I think the moment grounded me because from everyone else's feedback, the match ended up pretty good.

The original Tiger would retain with a frightening one knee Tombstone piledriver and tiger suplex, but Romero would snatch

away Yamazaki's mask post-match, ensuring their feud would last into the summer. Along with promising talent coming through the LA Dojo and a relationship with TNA Stateside, the junior division was starting to show new life, and was outshining the top end of the card which seemed somewhat barren.

Lending support to the main event scene was Satoshi Kojima. His February Ryogoku match with Hiroyoshi Tenzan was a remarkable and dramatic affair, built around Tenzan's back and neck. What seemed destined to go the full 60 minutes (meaning that Tenzan's IWGP and Kojima's Triple Crown championships would have both remained with the status quo) instead ended when Tenzan couldn't find his feet with 15 seconds remaining. Kojima would be the first to hold both All Japan and New Japan's heavyweight championships simultaneously.

Kojima was at his absolute prime as a performer and would follow his historic win with another demanding 60 minute draw with Shinsuke Nakamura one month later. Nexess would see the Tenzan rematch though, as the deposed champion vowed to 'find Hiroyoshi Yamamoto again' and trained in boxing gyms to end the match early with a knockout.

The old friends and rivals did have a much shorter affair this time, and a knockout finish was teased, but with Tenzan on the floor. With Kojima on relentless offense it seemed again that Tenzan would not make it to his feet and be counted out once more, but the challenger dug down and rose off the mat. Tenzan would hit a dangerous alteration to his Tombstone Driver to pin Kojima and bring back the IWGP championship to New Japan. After a run of unhappy endings for the New Japan faithful inside the Tokyo Dome, it was a rare feel good moment to close the show, and the start of Tenzan's fourth and final IWGP reign.

Behind the scenes, meanwhile, political maneuverings remained the order of the day. After effects of Katsuyori Shibata's departure in January were felt at Nexess, but things weren't entirely negative. Shibata was set to be a focal point of Big Mouth Loud, a promotion set up by former New Japan booker Fumihiko Uwai and with supervision and coaching from Akira Maeda and Masakatsu Funaki. New Japan were still open to working with Shibata on a freelance basis, and Shibata would show up at ringside to watch Yuji Nagata defeat Tsuyoshi Kosaka.

Gone for good was Seiichi Kusuyama. In as president under a two-year deal, Kusuyama was gone in one, New Japan having to eventually pay the former president penalties for breaking the agreement early to install Simon Inoki, Antonio's son-in-law at the head of the company in late May. That wasn't the end to the changes New Japan would face in 2005.

Pro Wrestling NOAH
NOAH Destiny 2005
July 18, 2005
Attendance 62,000

Masashi Aoyagi, SUWA & Takashi Sugiura def. Katsuhiko Nakajima, Mitsuo Momota & Tsuyoshi Kikuchi

Mohammed Yone & Takeshi Morishima def. Go Shiozaki & Tamon Honda

Dark Agents (Akitoshi Saito, Kishin Kawabata & Masao Inoue) & Shiro Koshinaka def. Akira Taue, Haruka EIgen, Jun Izumida & Takuma Sano

Mushiking Terry def. Black Mask

GHC Junior Heavyweight Championship
KENTA def. Yoshinobu Kanemaru

GHC Tag Team Championships
Minoru Suzuki & Naomichi Marufuji def. Jun Akiyama & Makoto Hashi

GHC Heavyweight Championship
Takeshi Rikio def. Hiroshi Tanahashi

Genichiro Tenryu def. Yoshinari Ogawa

Kenta Kobashi def. Kensuke Sasaki

Mitsuharu Misawa def. Toshiaki Kawada

A bigger piece of a smaller pie. That continued to be the story of NOAH into 2005, but the company that had enjoyed a five-year upswing was starting to feel the pinch of a sharply contracting industry.

The 1.58 billion Yen in sales reported by NOAH in 2004/2005 was down to the 1.2 billion range the next year. While the promotion would claim a 62,000 sell out for Destiny 2005, the 05/06 earnings report that the show was included in indicated that the company took a 10 million Yen decline in revenue on the event[128]. While this wasn't a big problem in itself, the signs of contraction would alarm Mitsuharu Misawa and his company into taking steps to restructure. One result of this was Destiny 2005 becoming the last event NOAH would run in the Tokyo Dome, and indeed the last time a promotion other than New Japan would run in the building for over a decade.

In the face of declining sales, NOAH elected to target audiences that New Japan wasn't catering toward. The likes of Naomichi Marufuji and KENTA were bringing in female audiences, and at Destiny, children were the focus.

The show ran on the Japanese national holiday of Ocean Day, a traditional start to the summer, and usually when schools ended for the summer break. Destiny ran in the afternoon and early evening instead of a more usual late evening/night time spot in order to drive a younger audience, and a kid friendly licensed character was given prominence in promotion.

Just as All Japan had teamed with SEGA in the 1990s to bring us Wolf Hawkfield straight out of *Virtua Fighter*, so NOAH worked with the company in 2005. Game development budgets and sales not being what they were, and SEGA in a much more conservative mindset having withdrawn from selling hardware and focusing on games, this

partnership didn't have a wrestling game as its end goal. Rather, NOAH would license characters from the child friendly arcade card game *Mushiking*.

The result would be Kotaro Suzuki playing the role of game lead character Mushiking Terry, to take on the evil Black Mask, played by Ricky Marvin. While Terry wouldn't have the same impact as a licensed character as Jushin Liger or Tiger Mask did, Suzuki would play the role from time to time all the way through 2008.

With the most kid friendly match of the card happening early on before children got restless, there was a clear division between two halves of the event; one with an emphasis on youth and a second leaving things to the older hands.

In the early going, Go Shiozaki made his Tokyo Dome debut at Destiny. With many of NOAH's younger talent having started in the All Japan dojo, Shiozaki was to be emphasized on as one of NOAH's first entirely homegrown stars. Less than a year removed from his debut, Shiozaki shone in his tag bout, delivering a spectacular German suplex to the huge Takeshi Morishima, along with a beautiful moonsault before being on the receiving end of a Mohammed Yone Kinniku Buster.

Shiozaki was 23 and handsome, and very much in the same mould as KENTA and Marufuji. Both young stars had moved up by Destiny 2005, Marufuji forming a heavyweight tag team, and KENTA striking out as a singles star. KENTA would clinch his first junior heavyweight championship over a Yoshinobu Kanemaru who had walked into the Dome as double champion, having won the junior tag belts with Takashi Sugiura the prior month.

Kanemaru would unleash all the offense he had on KENTA's neck, starting with his Deep Impact leaping DDT to the floor, and carrying on through a second in ring, suplexes and brainbusters, but KENTA would relentlessly kick out. Firing back with his own smooth and vicious offense, KENTA would land his Go To Sleep but only for a two count, his win secured with a running knee to Kanemaru's face he would later christen the *Busaiku* (ugly) knee. The reception of the crowd gave a strong indication of just how popular KENTA was, and how significant the GHC junior title was, this match in a real sense overshadowing the heavyweight title bout later in the show.

Marufuji meanwhile had spent years fighting with heavyweights while

still keeping a junior's physique. Having officially moved up as a heavyweight, Marufuji would face Minoru Suzuki in late 2004, and show the Pancrase veteran something even in defeat. They were a somewhat strange pairing, but the combination of Marufuji's usual smoothness with the rough and ready bullying of Suzuki made for compelling tag champions. They would retain at Destiny over Jun Akiyama and Marufuji's All Japan dojo contemporary (and Akiyama's assistant) Makoto Hashi. Hashi had recovered from a concussion as he headed to the Dome show, which was the story of the match, fighting through injury to try and get to Marufuji, who had chalked up his first career win at his expense.

Suzuki and Marufuji would just bully Hashi, starting with Minoru kicking away at Hashi's arms to release his grip on the ropes as Marufuji powerbombed him to the floor from a sunset flip. In ring, as at 2004's Dome show, Marufuji landed a top rope Shiranui to retain the tag titles, Suzuki afterward demanding stronger opposition.

Normally the GHC heavyweight title would headline, but with a pair of dream matches and a grudge bout with more established names on top, the relatively inexperienced new champion was fourth from the top. Takeshi Rikio had come from sumo into the All Japan dojo, and as he entered his 30s, was promoted as the future of NOAH, breaking from his Wild 2 partner Morishima to depose Kenta Kobashi in a GHC title upset. Rikio was initially set to face Shinsuke Nakamura at Destiny, though New Japan would loan Hiroshi Tanahashi instead, Nakamura set to be heavily focused on in the imminent G1 Climax.

Rikio's size and power would be put against Tanahashi's speed and aggression as he immediately hit successive suicide dives to the champion. While the title match had its moments before Rikio used a high angled uranage to retain, it would have had no hope on top of the card following what was to come.

Genichiro Tenryu had arrived in NOAH in January, teaming with a wide variety of partners, and instantly drawing the ire of Yoshinari Ogawa. Ogawa had worked as Tenryu's assistant as a teenager before Tenryu formed SWS, and finally now was able to enact revenge for Tenryu's betrayal of All Japan. The ensuing brawl, which Tenryu won with a lariat, embracing his junior heavyweight protege afterward, was nearly 15 years in the making; while heated, the match that followed it was the stuff of legend on a much shorter build.

'The card was reshuffled a few times, and they didn't announce us in

advance. I found out about it three days before,' Kenta Kobashi would recall of his clash with Kensuke Sasaki.[129] Despite sharing powerhouse builds and penchants for chops and lariats, the drawing of promotional lines had always precluded Kobashi and Sasaki from talking to one another. Indeed, the two elected not to talk to each other at all beforehand, instead doing their talking in ring; they even issued no comments to the press before the match.

The match would go down in history for its chop exchange, but the bout was a physical affair before the 'knife edge festival' began. In athletic form Sasaki would even hit a huge top rope Frankensteiner to Kobashi before one of Japanese wrestling history's most famous sequences occurred.

Kobashi and Sasaki would proceed to chop one another a total of 187 times, a back and forth that started intensely, veered into the almost comedic, and looped back around into high drama. Neither would cave to the other in five minutes that was certainly attributable to a lack of conversation and going by the energy of an uproarious crowd. Looking back, Kobashi would say he wasn't a fan of the moment ('I watch that now and think "how long are we going to keep hitting each other?"' He said in 2014[130]) before gaining more perspective, in 2017 stating 'It's absurd. We chopped each other 187 times. But that absurdity, the drama in the absurdity is the heart of pro wrestling in a way'.[131] The two collapsed in a heap, Kobashi having 'won' the exchange if score was being kept, but the fans standing and stamping their feet allowed little respite.

Sasaki would respond with a Northern Lights Bomb to the floor, and not to be outdone, Kobashi would land several half nelson suplexes in ring. Eventually a series of backfists before a lariat sealed the deal for Kobashi, Sasaki even in defeat thanking his opponent and the fans for a match that 'felt just amazing'.

Sasaki and Kobashi so enraptured the Tokyo Dome crowd that even a reuniting of Toshiaki Kawada and Mitsuharu Misawa had a tough time following up. It was a similar battle of attrition between evenly matched opponents, but where Kobashi and Sasaki was rousing and energetic, Kawada and Misawa took the audience down the other side of the mountain they were high on. Playing on past history, it was a cathartic greatest hits collection of two friends and rivals.

Not to say this wasn't a dangerous affair; both dug out their most terrifying maneuvers, created by accident and here used in anger.

Misawa would use his Tiger Driver 91, a move created by accident when he dropped Akira Taue on his head in the titular year. Kawada would use the vertical drop *'ganso'* bomb, first a result of a broken arm. Neither would get the job done, and deconstructing the *oudou* narrative of escalation, it was a simple elbow from Misawa that secured the win for the NOAH president. 'In the end that was all it took,' he'd state.

While both would leave the door open for one more bout, it was the last time Kawada and Misawa met in the ring. Kawada would embrace a comedic side in HUSTLE over the next few years in between runs with New and All Japan, and wouldn't return to NOAH until 2010, after the company founder's sudden death. The rivalry ended fittingly, on top in the country's biggest venue. For the promotion too, Destiny saw NOAH withdraw from the Tokyo Dome with two phenomenal shows in front of impressive crowds. They were destined for tough times ahead, but NOAH's two excursions to the Dome were nothing short of spectacular.

New Japan Pro Wrestling
Toukon Souzou (Fighting Spirit Creation) New Chapter
October 8, 2005
Attendance 38,000

Osamu Nishimura & Tatsumi Fujinami def. Riki Choshu & Tomohiro Ishii

Tatsuhito Takaiwa & Yoshihito Sasaki def. Koji Kanemoto & Wataru Inoue

Hiroyoshi Tenzan, Naofumi Yamamoto, Takashi Iizuka & Yutaka Yoshie def. Kamikaze, Kohei Sato, Ryoji Sai & Shinjiro Otani

IWGP Junior Heavyweight Tag Team Championships
CTU (Hirooki Goto & Minoru) def. Frelimo & Negro Casas

Team JAPAN (Kendo Kashin & Manabu Nakanishi) def. Charlie Haas & Mark Jindrak

Matt Morgan def. Yuji Nagata

IWGP Junior Heavyweight Championship/NWA World Junior Heavyweight Championship
Black Tiger def. Tiger Mask

Hiroshi Tanahashi & Shinsuke Nakamura def. Toshiaki Kawada & Yoji Anjo

IWGP Heavyweight Championship
Brock Lesnar def. Kazuyuki Fujita & Masahiro Chono

Seiichi Kusuyama had found out he was leaving as president of New Japan after a Tokyo Sports reporter asked him for comment on quitting, having been told by Antonio Inoki this was the case.[132]The gears in promotional management once again moved awkwardly, leading to Kusuyama suing NJPW for reneging on their contract and writing a pair of scathing books in short order[133]. As legal and PR issues lingered in the background though, the promotion would move on. Kusuyama had entered the company after a professional association with Antonio Inoki; the next president had a closer tie to the founder.

Simon Kelly Inoki's start in his father-in-law's business came in the late 1990s as he liaised with American fighters for the ill-fated UFO. In mid 2000 he joined the booking committee at New Japan for a brief spell, before ascending up the management ladder.

The younger Inoki's sudden appointment in the middle of Kusuyama's contract would spark a lot of speculation; the more cynical take was that this would be a way for Antonio Inoki to financially divest from New Japan and start a new project, while still having a hand in the company he started. Regardless of the conflicts of interest this would create however, there were some positive changes came from Inoki's

first few months in power.

First was solidification of ties the younger Inoki had made while working with the LA Dojo. In the works since Hulk Hogan's one-off match with Masahiro Chono and the post-match Jeff Jarrett assault, New Japan would become an official member of the National Wrestling Alliance. This would allow for talent exchanges with TNA in the States; while the Nashville promotion was nowhere near as significant to its home market as WCW when NJPW worked with them, it would create a roster depth that the company sorely needed.

For now, the NWA influence was felt when Rocky Romero won the alliance's world junior heavyweight title, leading to a double title match with Tiger Mask. Finding himself more at home in the Black Tiger guise, Romero spent much of the match attacking the mask of his opponent, and while the more honourable Tiger got the bulk of offense, a bumped referee and low blow led to a Tombstone and a new IWGP junior champion.

Rocky Romero
I dove into (approaching Black Tiger) really from an actor's point of view. I was given a character with a background and a story, so I created a deeper story for him.

I thought about what his training would be like; if Tiger Mask was trained by Sayama, there's things he emulates, little mannerisms. So I started to really study Mark Rocco, spending hundreds of bucks on World of Sport tapes and looking at little intricate things he'd do. Before Marc would lock up as Black Tiger he used to move his mask around a little. I started emulating that, how he walked, talked, hit a back elbow. Rocco never stopped, not even to sell. He kept moving, that was his style, so I had to work in my cardio, and based my style on his.

Then I created this rivalry with Tiger Mask that didn't really exist, but it did in my head. This idea of representing our masters and me eternally hating this guy. Once I won the belts, I felt I could relax a bit and make the character my own.

Another important partnership was with CMLL in Mexico. The lucha libre connection to the historic promotion would see talent cross back and forth for learning excursions and special shows for years to come, and its influence was felt in two matches at New Chapter.

Felino and Negro Casas, two brothers in a large wrestling family, formed fresh challengers to junior tag champions Hirooki Goto and Minoru Tanaka. Goto had gone from strength to strength as 2005 continued, winning the last Young Lion Cup New Japan would promote until 2017. He would follow through with a strong performance in the Best of the Super Juniors and had certifiably graduated from his dojo status. The CTU team would retain, with Goto picking up the victory and extending their title run into its seventh month. Goto would go on a yearlong excursion to CMLL in autumn 2006, and emerge in the main event scene.

Hiroshi Tanahashi and Shinsuke Nakamura were already main eventers when they headed to Mexico after the G1. The tag partners and rivals would return in the autumn with a renewed vigor, and greater depth. Tanahashi was more arrogant and preening while Nakamura had merged lucha elements in with his style. Opposite an odd couple freelance pairing in Toshiaki Kawada and Yoji Anjo, Nakamura would fly in with a dropkick, and on missing Anjo would instead smoothly transition into his Jiujitsu style offense to out wrestle the UWF veteran. Later Nakamura would hit a corkscrew moonsault and move into a Mexican Stretch muffler variant with Anjo horizontal; Kawada had no time for such flash and stamped on Nakamura's face.

That was the story of the match, Kawada being straightforward and violent, Anjo weasel like, hanging back behind a tougher partner. Tanahashi would pick up the win on Anjo with a Dragon suplex and instantly had to deal with a rampaging Kawada; pulled apart, the two seemed set for a big singles confrontation. Unfortunately, any plans for such a match disintegrated, the two going their separate ways before finally having a 30 minute draw during the 2008 Champion Carnival for All Japan.

It wasn't just CMLL that influenced New Chapter, but the return of Riki Choshu. With Inoki senior largely out of the day to day running at New Japan, Choshu would re-enter the company, as a performer at first. Here, Choshu would give Tomohiro Ishii his Tokyo Dome debut and a way into New Japan. Having started in the dying days of WAR, Ishii had found himself in Choshu's WJ where he impressed with a fervent work ethic and willingness to help. Both Choshu and Katsuji Nagashima would admit to being big fans of Ishii's, and that had WJ lasted, he would have become a featured player.[134]

Finally in New Japan under Choshu's wing, he was heavily emphasized in a match where long standing veteran rivals mainly let

their respective charges go at it. Ishii would throw some impressive suplexes to get near falls before Nishimura eventually followed up on Fujinami's Dragon Screw with a figure four to get a submission win.

Days later, and with little prior warning as his return came as a result of clandestine conversations with Simon Inoki[135], Choshu would reassume the booking reigns in New Japan and set about restructuring cards and rebuilding the in-ring product with an old school approach. 'My stance to booking hasn't changed,' he'd comment. 'If you've got this much good talent, we shouldn't be in this mess. It's simple stuff. If the young wrestlers are good, they can wrestle the same match every day of the week and still be good.'[136]

Not all steps were positive. Kusuyama had encouraged austerity as a means to get the company operating in the black during his brief tenure, but 2005 saw a wave of spending. Matt Morgan, Charlie Haas and Mark Jindrak were all brought into New Japan immediately following WWE releases. All three would be put opposite Yuji Nagata's more patriotic follow-up to the G-EGGS stable in Team JAPAN. Haas and Jindrak had a surprisingly brawling affair with Manabu Nakanishi and Kendo Kashin given the amateur backgrounds of three quarters of the match. Morgan meanwhile had a strong match with Nagata, looking like an imposing monster. It was questionable, whether the expense spared upon the trio was appropriate for the time, however; especially when another expensive foreign monster was debuting in the main event.

Brock Lesnar had been a supernova in WWE, with a fast rise to stardom, an impactful string of performances, and a rapid burning out. Tired of a demanding touring schedule, and with enthusiasm for the wrestling business fast fading, Lesnar bailed from his WWE contract after 2004's Wrestlemania show. Still in his 20s, Lesnar wanted to pursue a career in American football and in order to escape from his contract early, agreed to an extensive non-compete clause that prohibited him from stepping back in the ring, in a pro wrestling or MMA capacity, for six years.

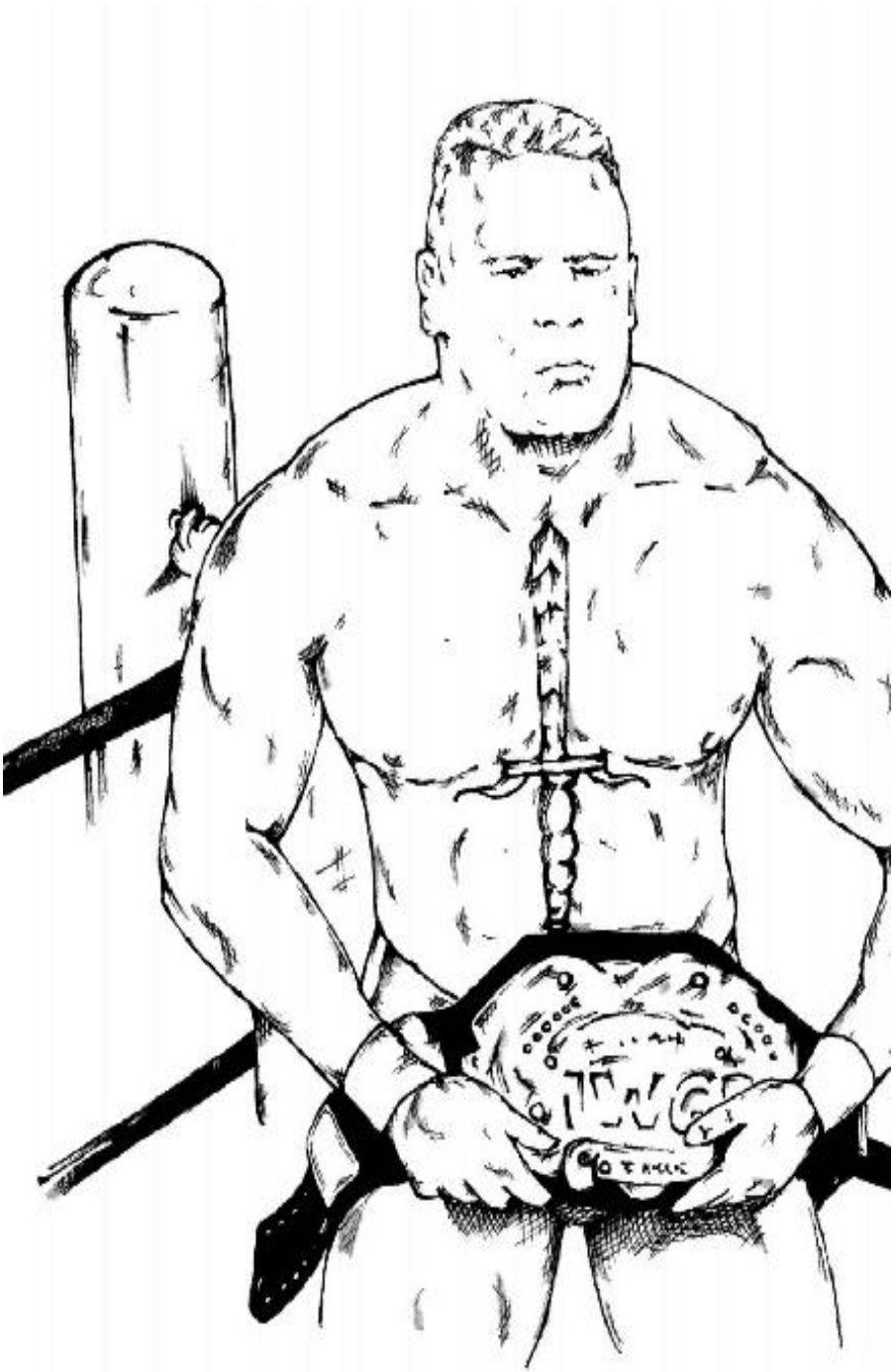
By 2005, Lesnar was open to participating in both. This made him extremely attractive to the Inokis, yet the legal situation was thorny indeed. In February, Lesnar would file suit against WWE to try and get the clause thrown out; before that he attended January's Wrestling World and was introduced by Antonio Inoki, but did nothing physical. As it seemed increasingly that the clause was non-enforceable,[137] the decision was taken to chance it.

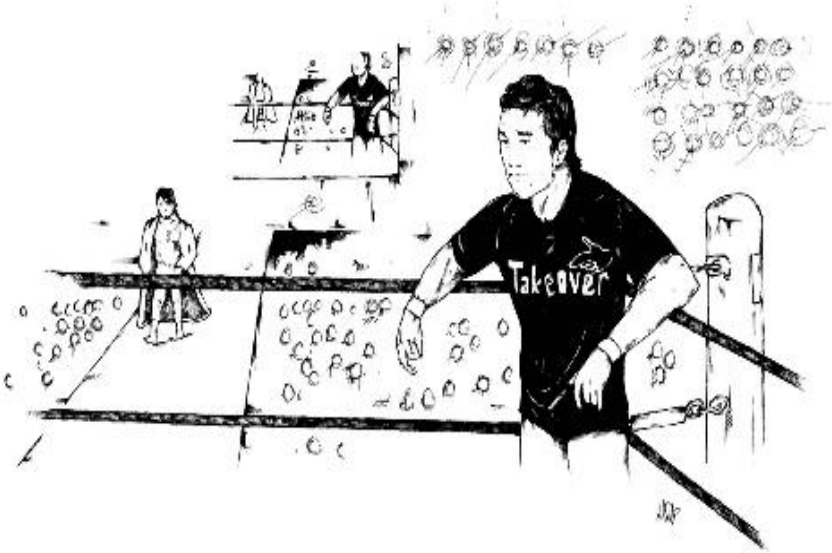
So it was that Lesnar would wrestle three dates in 2005 for New Japan. In December he would face Nakanishi and Nagata in singles matches, but for New Chapter he would hop straight into a challenge for the IWGP title. Protecting a singles match with champion Kazayuki Fujita, Masahiro Chono would be added to the mix, the traditional opponent for A-list foreign imports making for the first ever three-way for New Japan's top championship.

Three bodies may have been in the ring, but the match was entirely Lesnar. The former WWE champion left his feet twice in an eight-minute main event and dominated Fujita and Chono. While Lesnar's attraction was as an unstoppable monster, the somewhat laughable length was not Tokyo Dome main event worthy, and the match failed to spark any excitement. Lesnar would lay out Fujita with an F-5 (due to the move name being a WWE copyright, and without anything new to call it, announcers simply dubbed the name an 'impressive spinning facebuster'), and as the champion rolled to the floor, Lesnar hit the same move to Chono and pinned him to become IWGP champion.

Fujita not being pinned, a singles confrontation for the title was an obvious direction, but the early finish to a deflating match was a blight on an otherwise solid card. Lesnar would take to the microphone after the main event and command the audience to 'buckle up for the ride that Brock Lesnar is going to take you for', which in hindsight, was a comically prophetic line.

2006




Takeover

New Japan Pro Wrestling
NJPW Toukon Shidou (Fighting Spirit Activation) Chapter 1
January 4, 2006
Attendance 43,000

Ryoji Sai def. Naofumi Yamamoto

Badboy Hido, Kintaro Kanemura & Masato Tanaka def. CTU (Jado, Gedo & Jushin Thunder Liger)

Minoru & Tiger Mask def. Tatsuhito Takaiwa & Tomohiro Ishii

Daisuke Sekimoto, Kamikaze, Kohei Sato, Riki Choshu, Takashi Uwano & Yoshihito Sasaki def. Hirooki Goto, Hiroshi Nagao, Osamu Nishimura, Takashi Iizuka, Tatsumi Fujinami & Toru Yano

Akebono & Yutaka Yoshie def. Black Strong Machine & Hiro Saito

Yuji Nagata def. Kazunari Murakami

Shinjiro Otani def. Koji Kanemoto

Katsuyori Shibata def. Hiroshi Tanahashi

Giant Bernard def. Manabu Nakanishi

IWGP Tag Team Championships
Hiroyoshi Tenzan & Masahiro Chono def. Shiro Koshinaka & Takao Omori

IWGP Heavyweight Championship
Brock Lesnar def. Shinsuke Nakamura

On November 14, 2005, a press conference was held at the Tokyo Dome Hotel where Yukinori Taniguchi, the president of Yuke's Company Limited, announced his company had purchased 51.5% of New Japan Pro Wrestling, with the purchase to be completed November 30.

The new majority owners had developed a series of New Japan licensed video games in the past, in addition to a lucrative WWE license that had them develop annual games and publish DVDs. Most recently, Yuke's was behind a primarily New Japan focused title called *Wrestle Kingdom,* which was set to launch alongside Microsoft's XBox 360 in Japan.

The purchase was deemed a necessary breath of life for New Japan to protect from being steamrolled by hostile takeovers[138][139], and a bargain basement purchase for Yuke's. Little initially changed in terms of either company's operation; Yuke's would continue to develop WWE games and publish DVDs, while Simon Inoki would still retain the reigns as president of NJPW.

There were less visible changes though. As Xbox 360 flopped in Japan, Yuke's prepared to bring *Wrestle Kingdom* to the more popular PlayStation 2, but had to rip out the original game's NOAH branded content in the process. For New Japan there was an effort to drastically cut costs. The promotion would run fewer shows, and less would be spent on promotion. For better or for worse, New Japan would have a lower profile. 'They were a videogame company and that's what they knew,' New Japan's next owner Takaaki Kidani would

comment in 2016. ‘They ran it like a video game company. So it was about getting things on time and under budget. What they weren't good at was selling the product or building audiences.’[140]

The grandeur of the Tokyo Dome was perhaps anachronistic considering the new austerity measures, but it would spark Riki Choshu to use his independent connections. Heading into 2006 stating ‘if we have another year like 2005, we’re done,’ Choshu would create a ‘New Japan versus the indies’ theme to the show, saying ‘I've come in here to a difficult situation, but I chose people that could add strength (to the show) I think this is a chance for everyone to show fans and the press what they can do.'[141]

Zero-One (relabelled Zero-One Max and headed up by Shinjiro Otani), Big Japan, and Apache made up the invading team to New Japan at Shidou. Apache had been formed in the ashes of FMW. Hiromichi Fuyuki had formed World Entertainment Wrestling after FMW disintegrated amid mountains of debt. Fuyuki would pass away in March 2003 after a battle with cancer, leaving Kintaro Kanemura and Go Ito to form Apache to continue the legacy, WEW becoming the ‘governing body’ lending a title to the belts.

Choshu and Tomohiro Ishii would work with Apache during the summer of 2004, and the promotion would grow closer to New Japan after Choshu took his job as match maker. A number of New Japan wrestlers would head over to Apache and gain a depth to their character they had been missing, Togi Makabe crediting his time wrestling deathmatches as WEW champion as key to ‘breaking away from Togi Makabe, the straightforward wrestler, he was a boring guy to watch.’[142]

Kanemura, along with Masato Tanaka and W*ING and FMW veteran Badboy Hido would represent Apache in the Tokyo Dome, and would play up their role as rough and ready violent indie wrestlers against a smoother, polished CTU team. Tables were produced from the outset, and Jado and Gedo quickly fell victim before the pair rallied with a gorgeous diving head scissors from Gedo and a Jado German suplex to Hido. The hardcore team would win out however, as Jado took a table end to the head followed by a Tanaka Diamond Dust and a senton from Kakihara. A definitive undercard win from the smaller invading faction indicated that Choshu’s time as a freelancer had drastically changed his booking approach.

The independents were depicted as being vastly different visually as

well as stylistically on the show, and this was emphasized in a crowded 12-man tag. New Japan talents, be they a Dojo resident like Hiroshi Nagao, or now evolving into a sake swigging aggressive drunkard like Toru Yano, all wore traditional black tights and boots, presenting a united front against the rag tag independents.

A collection of Zero One Max and Big Japan talent, the crew was led by a very different Choshu than the one who was fervently anti independents in the 1990s. Standing out were Daisuke Sekimoto and Yoshihito Sasaki, a pair with promising young careers. Sekimoto would be a BJW lifer, providing a strong style counterpoint to the promotion's hardcore reputation. Sasaki too, would represent the 'Strong BJ' movement when he left Zero One for Big Japan in 2008.

The New Japan and Zero One antagonism would spill over into a a title match on the show. Takao Omori would represent the promotion teaming with Shiro Koshinaka in what would turn out to be both men's last appearances on the main card of a Tokyo Dome show. Omori would wind up for what may have even beaten Muto for the longest run up to a Tokyo Dome ramp lariat in history as he clobbered Masahiro Chono, but ChoTen would retain the titles they had won back in late October after a Chono Shining Kenka kick to Koshinaka.

Shinjiro Otani's clash with Koji Kanemoto, though, would prove the centerpiece of the interpromotional feud, the invading president taking on his age-old rival. There was an air of finality to this match too, with this becoming the last singles match between the two in New Japan. Again, Zero One seemed definitively superior to NJPW on the night in the Dome, Otani controlling most of the match before ending things with a straight punch to Kanemoto's jaw and a Dragon suplex.

By the middle of the night, New Japan had, on balance, already lost out to Apache, Zero One, and Big Japan before Big Mouth Loud entered the picture. Katsuyori Shibata and Kazunari Murakami had experienced a light schedule through 2005 after leaving New Japan for the upstart BML. The promotion for its part gathered a cult following for its Battlarts like hard hitting (yet unabashedly pro wrestling) style, but would struggle to retain audiences in a tough climate. Both men would work for Choshu promoted RikiPro shows in the wake of WJ's collapse meanwhile, which opened a door for one night back in New Japan.

Murakami would face the ultimate gatekeeper in Yuji Nagata, while

Shibata would have to face Hiroshi Tanahashi, confronting his fellow Dojo classmate furious with him for walking out and abandoning his spot.

The result was a pair of matches that were equally violent, but with vastly different results. Nagata would dominate Murakami, bloodying the cocky fighter who still rose to his feet with an arrogant grin. In a match that was reminiscent of the bloody beating Murakami had put on Shibata a few years earlier, Nagata would win with a pair of backdrop suplexes.

Tanahashi would be less fortunate with Big Mouth Loud tying things up at one win apiece. Shibata was absolutely dominant against Tanahashi, peppering in kicks as the future Ace tried to mount offense. Tanahashi would catch a penalty kick from Shibata and fire back with a German suplex, but as he looked to slingshot Shibata off the ropes, would get punted in the head. Shibata would proceed to rain down blows on Tanahashi until the referee applied a ten count; as he rose to his feet, Shibata continued his assault ending in a pinfall. While the two interpromotional matches ending in a tie appeared to be a political move, the dominant nature of each match was a shock, especially in Shibata and Tanahashi's case. It would seem as if this was a rivalry that would continue as Tanahashi launched himself on a road to redemption; in practice, Shibata wouldn't step into a New Japan ring again for six and a half years.

The few matches that didn't carry an interpromotional focus instead put a heavy emphasis on foreign giants. Matt Bloom had headed to All Japan via the Johnny Ace connection after his WWE release, and would jump to NJPW full time in 2006, starting with an unremarkable win over Manabu Nakanishi.

Akebono was making his official pro wrestling debut; the Hawaiian former sumo had been involved in a bizarre worked sumo match for WWE in 2005 but was now making a full-time change. Hugely limited by inexperience and sheer size, he would struggle to his debut victory with a Yutaka Yoshie who had settled into a mildly comedic mid card role. Yet Akebono was devoted to his position, and a celebrity status earned from his former profession would see him rocketed to main event status in the coming months.

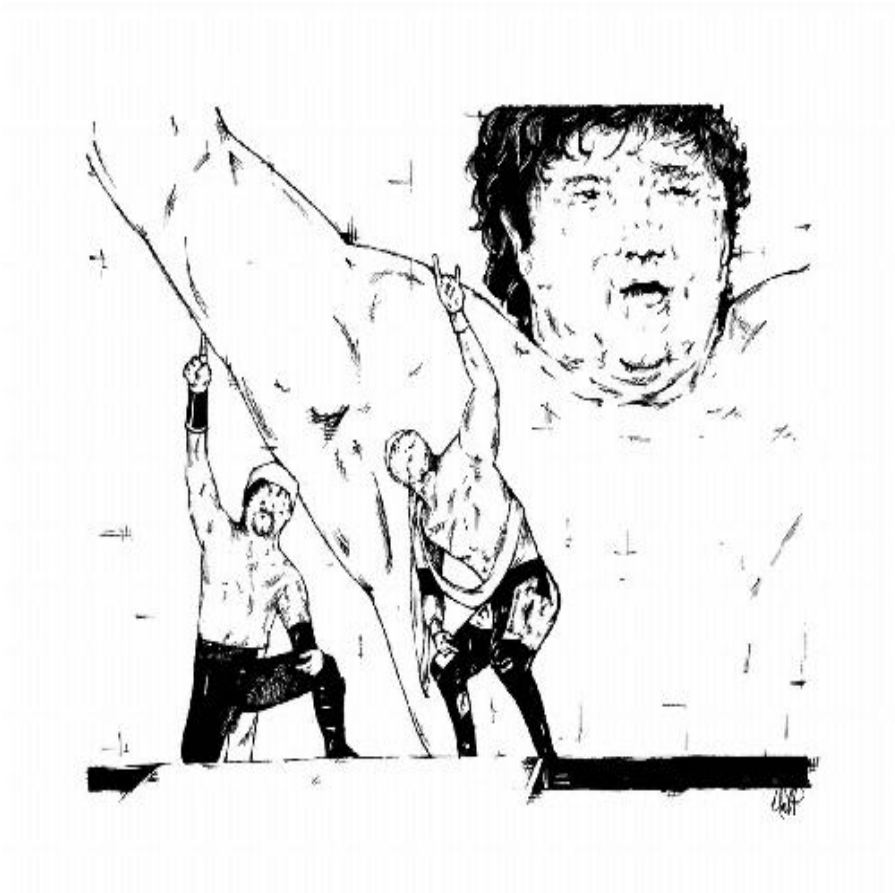
That main event spot would come opposite Brock Lesnar. After his three-way IWGP win, a singles match with Kazayuki Fujita was on the cards. To the anger of TV Asahi, sponsors and new owners Yuke's

however, Fujita would declare himself out of the match in late December. With dual contracts to New Japan and Antonio Inoki's office, Fujita would site 'contractual issues'[143] as the reason for his absence, and would become an independent in February of 2006.

At Shidou Lesnar instead faced Shinsuke Nakamura in the fourth sub ten-minute main event in the company since his debut. The story was one of Nakamura pushing Lesnar, and giving his toughest challenge so far, taking the champion down with a German suplex in a brief flurry. Moments later though, Lesnar would hit his finish (now renamed Verdict as a nod to his legal battles with WWE) to retain in a flat ending to the show.

In another battle of theory being trumped by practice, Lesnar seemed destined to be pushed steadily harder until a valiant Japanese hero could take down the foreign monster. That wouldn't happen though, as the Yuke's era of NJPW began with its fair share of challenges.

2007



New Japan Pro Wrestling
NJPW Wrestle Kingdom

January 4, 2007
Attendance: 28,000

El Samurai, Masanobu Fuchi & Ryusuke Taguchi def. Akira Raijin, Kikutaro & Nobutaka Araya

Jado & Gedo def. Tokyo Gurentai (MASADA & NOSAWA Rongai)

Great Bash Heel (Togi Makabe, Toru Yano & Tomohiro Ishii) def. Voodoo Murders (Buchanan, D'Lo Brown & Travis Tomko)

Giant Bernard, Ro'Z & Voodoo Murders (Suwama & TARU) def. Manabu Nakanishi, Naofumi Yamamoto, Riki Choshu & Takashi Iizuka

Kaz Hayashi, Koji Kanemoto, TAKA Michinoku, Tiger Mask & Wataru Inoue def. CTU (Jushin Thunder Liger & Minoru), Milano Collection AT & Voodoo Murders (Shuji Kondo & "Brother" YASSHI)

Toshiaki Kawada def. Shinsuke Nakamura

Triple Crown Championship
Minoru Suzuki def. Yuji Nagata

IWGP Heavyweight Championship
Hiroshi Tanahashi def. Taiyo Kea

Keiji Muto & Masahiro Chono def. Hiroyoshi Tenzan & Satoshi Kojima

2006 had seen New Japan operate with a smaller budget, on a smaller scale, and to smaller audiences. A smaller staff and roster too; in the summer Tatsumi Fujinami would leave the company after 34 years. Taking with him his protege Osamu Nishimura and veteran ring announcer Kero Tanaka, Fujinami would start his own company, Dradition, running irregular shows. Speculation would indicate his

departure was due to friction with Riki Choshu, though Fujinami certainly had earned the right to semi-retirement.

Brock Lesnar was most conspicuous by his absence as 2006 went on. After an IWGP title defense in March against Akebono, Lesnar was scheduled to defend (and lose) the belt against Hiroshi Tanahashi on July 17 in Sapporo. The defense never happened; on July 15, Simon Inoki announced that due to 'visa issues' Brock Lesnar wouldn't be making the trip to Japan. The press meanwhile disputed official explanations, concluding that Lesnar's absence was due to unspecified 'contractual disputes' [144].

Lesnar had found a passion for MMA by this point in his career and talking to the K-1 and HERO'S promotion may have resulted in his cancellation. More likely there was financial motivation at play. Either way, NJPW was in the embarrassing position of having to cut another main event at short notice, and even found itself without the physical IWGP belt that Lesnar held onto. Tanahashi would win a hastily organized one-night tournament to become champion, but not in the way he would want. The inaugural Wrestle Kingdom event, named to promote Yuke's video games that were struggling at retail, would see Tanahashi continue to rehab the title against the invading Taiyo Kea.

Kea was announced as part of an All Japan collaboration that worked its way through the entire Wrestle Kingdom card. In November, Simon Inoki would hold a press conference with Keiji Muto, staged on the pitcher's mound in the Dome to announce the crossover. Promoted as celebrating both company's upcoming 35th anniversaries, Inoki would state that 'there's all sorts of directions we can go, for intriguing matches and for dream matches'[145]. Inoki and Muto would announce that the IWGP and Triple Crown Championships would both be up for grabs at the Tokyo Dome, though without any matches announced weeks away from the show, Wrestle Kingdom was still a hard sell.

Whether fans were drawn to a card with a late build, and with few repercussions outside the event thanks to its billing as an one-off, its title matches delivered in ring. Kea and Tanahashi was a battle of each promotion's young aces now consistently at the top of cards as they entered their thirties. Kea, bigger and with a more powerful style than Tanahashi, would threaten his first IWGP reign, dominating most of their twenty minutes. An early TKO on exposed concrete set up Kea working over the champion, and while Tanahashi would respond with a Slingblade, Kea shut Tanahashi down again.

Tanahashi was proving himself as a resilient champion worthy of the main event spot thrust upon him by Lesnar's departure, though. He would withstand a Last Ride style powerbomb in ring and hit a dragon suplex and his recently adopted High Fly Flow frog splash to retain.

Minoru Suzuki and Yuji Nagata were much more evenly matched, much more violent, and instantly memorable. Suzuki had won the Triple Crown Championship from Kea in the autumn, as part of a journeyman year that saw him wrestle for Mitsuharu Misawa (NOAH), Keiji Muto (AJPW), Kensuke Sasaki (Kensuke Office) and Fumihiko Uwai (UWAI Station, spinning off from Big Mouth Loud, which had already petered out).

This would be the first of three Tokyo Dome meetings between the two, and outdid their prior encounters in G1 Climaxes in 2004 and 2005. Suzuki as champion was even more arrogant and evil, and a cocky slap to Nagata starting the match instantly sent his Triple Crown challenger into a rage.

Both men would bleed, and while this was less of a massacre than Nagata's match with Sasaki in 2004, it didn't lack intensity. Neither would give up during a frantic battle of slaps, and as both collapsed to the mat, they would follow by crawling toward another and bashing their bloody skulls together.

Nagata would fire up and connect a huge kick to Suzuki, but the champion would instantly pop up and sink in a rear naked choke. As Nagata faded, Suzuki would win a match that had the crowd chanting for both men and brought a partisan emotion to proceedings that other matches on the card had lacked.

This was the case for Shinsuke Nakamura and Toshiaki Kawada, who had a hard-fought match, but one that lacked the intensity Kawada brought on home turf. Nakamura would really only find the New Japan faithful behind him toward the end of a Kawada heavy match. Kicking out of a Kawada powerbomb and a scary high angled brainbuster, Nakamura would duck out of the way of what would be one brutal head kick only to eat another seconds later to take the loss.

The undercard was dominated by tag matches with an emphasis on All Japan's biggest stable. Voodoo Murders had established themselves as a unit two years prior, and grew steadily larger. It would become home to many wrestlers coming to All Japan from outside; be they former Dragon Gate talent like founder member TARU, Shuji Kondo,

or ‘Brother’ YASSHI, or foreigners, as the stable absorbed the predominantly American RO&D in 2006.

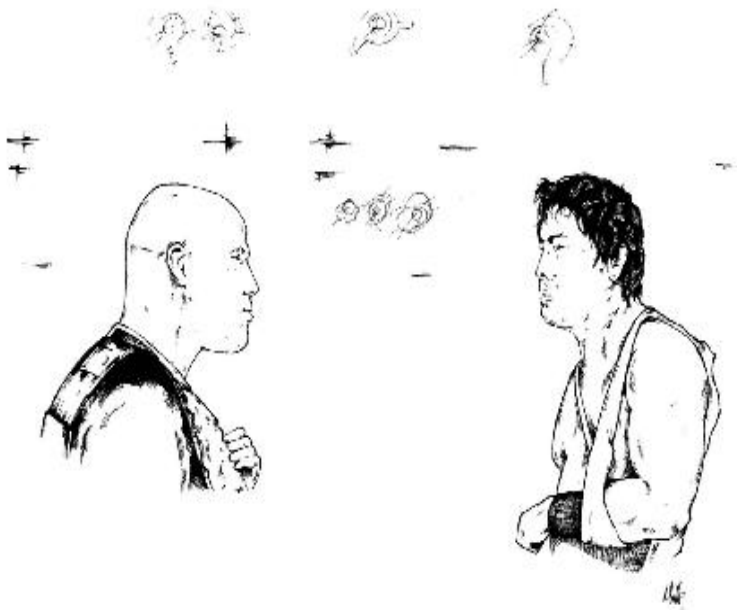
Matches underneath were strong but unspectacular and highlighted a large number of bodies with relatively little breadth of talent or name value in both New and All Japan. The predominantly New Japan crowd unfamiliar with the lower names on AJPW’s pecking order weren’t invested, and only came alive for Riki Choshu’s appearance in his eight-man tag (and, perhaps, for the antics of cult favourite comedy wrestler Kikutaro in his only Tokyo Dome appearance to date).

The biggest names were kept for the main event. New and All Japan were united on both sides of the ring, as Hiroyoshi Tenzan and Satoshi Kojima reformed their team following their 2005 title rivalry, and on the opposite side, Masahiro Chono and Keiji Muto teamed once more.

Contrary to his 2005 plans, this wasn't Chono’s retirement. It wouldn't even be the last time he and Muto would team together, but the nostalgia heavy match felt at the time like a fitting last hurrah for the two surviving musketeers. Mirroring the main event of Fantastic Story nearly 17 years later, it was now Muto and Chono in the Inoki and Seiji Sakaguchi roles, standing tall one more time opposite a younger team in their prime. The scene, as Chono kicked out of a Tenzan Tombstone and locked in an STF, Muto simultaneously submitting Kojima with a Figure Four, was more meaningful than the match, and the show closed on an emotional note.

Chono and Muto would tie white headbands around their heads and point to the Dome roof as Hashimoto’s music played. It was a gesture of pro wrestling love to the heavens, to an undying spirit from a promotion insisting it wasn't dead yet.

2008



New Japan Pro Wrestling
NJPW Wrestle Kingdom II
January 4, 2008
Attendance 27,000

AJ Styles, Christian Cage & Petey Williams def. RISE (Milano Collection AT, Minoru & Prince Devitt)

IWGP Junior Heavyweight Championship

Wataru Inoue def. Christopher Daniels

Manabu Nakanishi def. Abyss

Katsushi Takemura, Masato Tanaka, Tatsuhito Takaiwa & Yutaka Yoshie def. Koji Kanemoto, Ryusuke Taguchi, Takashi Iizuka & Tiger Mask

Hardcore Match
Team 3D (Brother Ray & Brother Devon) def. Great Bash Heel (Togi Makabe & Toru Yano)

LEGEND (AKIRA, Jushin Thunder Liger, Masahiro Chono, Riki Choshu & Tatsumi Fujinami) def. Voodoo Bash Heel (Gedo, Jado, Shuji Kondo, TARU & 'Brother' YASSHI)

Great Muta def. Hirooki Goto

IWGP Tag Team Championships
Giant Bernard & Travis Tomko def. Steiner Brothers (Rick Steiner & Scott Steiner)

IWGP Third Belt Championship
Kurt Angle def. Yuji Nagata

IWGP Heavyweight Championship
Shinsuke Nakamura def. Hiroshi Tanahashi

From Battle Satellite all the way up through the Wrestling World years, New Japan would use the kanji 闘強導夢 on promotional materials. In itself, this was a nonsense phrase, four disparate characters stitched together because together they could be read 'tou-kyou-dou-mu'. Strange syntax aside, the phrase worked thematically; 'fight', 'strength', 'guidance' and 'dream'. Warriors finding guidance through inner strength as they fight to pursue their dreams.

In 2008, New Japan was no field of dreams. Politically, 2007 had been another year of change, as Simon Inoki departed as president in March. In his place, Yuke's would install Naoki Sugabayashi, a longtime fan who had worked part time on All and New Japan road crews before entering the business world. Sugabayashi would finally

lend some stability to a post that had seen turbulent times. Inoki, meanwhile would join his father in his new pro wrestling project, the Inoki Genome Federation.

IGF would follow the same hybrid MMA and pro wrestling route as the Inoki-ist era of New Japan and would spare no expense on its early shows. Brock Lesnar, still in possession of the IWGP championship belt he held when he left in 2006, was convinced to wrestle, and to do so with Kurt Angle. Angle had joined TNA in the States from WWE in 2006, and as ties between NJPW and TNA deepened, there was a win-win situation on offer. New Japan could get their title back via Angle while IGF had a theoretical big drawing main event.

Top level company politics and confusing title situations aside, the in-ring side of New Japan was steadily becoming stronger. Starting first with Riki Choshu in charge creatively, and as he gradually stepped back from his role, tag veterans Jado and Gedo, matchmaking was becoming more narratively driven. With a focus on in ring performances that took the best elements of older New Japan and Inoki-ism, an aggressive style showing a will to win, and the more story driven *Oudou* of NOAH and All Japan, the 'strong style' was evolving.

The promotion, unable to find a true hero to latch onto in the Inoki-ism era, was now able to get behind newer faces entering their peaks. Hiroshi Tanahashi would have a breakthrough 2007, an arrogant antagonist to gatekeeper Yuji Nagata.

Togi Makabe would finally push through to main event status after a decade struggling to get noticed. Taking over the Great Bash Heel stable from founder Hiroyoshi Tenzan, Makabe would bring prominence to other dirty fighters eager for a spotlight, such as Jado and Gedo, Tomoaki Honma and Tomohiro Ishii.

Makabe would headline in December of 2007, with a number one contendership to Tanahashi's IWGP title at stake. He would be beaten by Shinsuke Nakamura, who continued to evolve an enigmatic persona to go with his serious background. Forming a new character after being part of Masahiro Chono's New Japan Black, he would splinter away from the older legends in the group to start RISE. The Real International Super Elite would include Milano Collection AT, who was now a full time New Japan wrestler after finishing with Dragon Gate. Fergal 'Prince' Devitt had worked hard in the NJPW's

Tokyo Dojo after the LA branch finally shut to cut costs, now showing his promise as a junior heavyweight along with Minoru Tanaka. Hirooki Goto would join the stable after returning from a Mexican excursion, now as a stoic warrior with a samurai spirit.

Yet for all the promise in the ring, business was still slow. Tours would see the promotion run in smaller buildings, while big shows struggled to perform. As Goto was elevated in November to challenge Tanahashi, a claimed 7000 in Ryogoku was actually closer to 2,200[146]. Far indeed from the field of dreams, New Japan was building it, but the people weren't coming.

For those that were in attendance on January 4, 2008, TNA's presence was a consistent through line on a show that also gave Zero One and Dradition one match guest spots (the latter leading to Tatsumi Fujinami making his first appearance since leaving New Japan, though he was barely involved in a Legends tag match against a Voodoo Murders and GBH alliance). Only the main event was an entirely New Japan affair.

There was good, bad and ugly in the American presence on the show. In the semifinal spot, Kurt Angle would defend the 'third belt' IWGP title against a Yuji Nagata who was insistent that Angle's belt was a 'fake championship'. Nagata and Angle were perfectly matched; the same age, with similar amateur backgrounds, and with a similar reputation for testing physical limits in ring.

Their match was an exceptional display. Evoking Angle's matches with Chris Benoit in WWE, much of the bout would be about Nagata negotiating a Nagata Lock II (similar to Benoit's Crossface) and Angle transitioning into ankle locks. Nagata would unleash a huge belly to belly suplex from the top rope, but as he sought to follow with a kick, Angle caught his challenger's ankle for a submission win. Now some six months removed from winning the belt on the Inokis' show, Angle would finally be in a position to unify the third IWGP belt with the second by the end of the evening.

The opening match of the night was more hectic, but foreshadowed the company's future. Years later, both Prince Devitt and AJ Styles would assume the role of lead foreign talent in New Japan as successive leaders of the Bullet Club. Here though Devitt showed his athletic prowess with a gorgeous tope con giro before Styles won the match with a Styles Clash to Milano; this would be the only time Styles and Devitt would meet in a New Japan ring as their paths

diverged to meet again in America nearly a decade later.

Manabu Nakanishi was never going to match the grace of the the opener's high-flying offense. His brief defeat of Abyss was billed as a clash of 'Japanese country boy monster versus American monster', and saw a Tokyo Dome first as Abyss pulled out a signature bag of thumbtacks. Nakanishi would avoid a spill onto the sharp points and would faceplant Abyss into the stationery instead in a short and lumpy brawl.

If Abyss and Nakanishi was more about brute force than beauty, then the ending to the IWGP tag title match made up the 'bad' of the 'good, bad and ugly' triumvirate. Giant Bernard had forged a solid tag team with another WWE alum in Travis Tomko, and a challenge from the returning Steiner brothers was presented as a clash of American powerhouses. Apropos of very little, Bernard would get into a verbal spat with Jeff Jarrett sat at ringside. As referee Tiger Hattori took a pratfall from a delicate stumble by Rick Steiner, Jarrett looked to use his signature guitar only to be stopped by Makabe and Toru Yano of GBH. Yano would take the guitar shot (having been powerbombed through a table in an earlier hardcore tag match, he had his fair share of splinters) while Makabe shoved Rick into Tomko's path leading to a victory for the 'home team' champions (this distinction discounting the fact that Tomko himself was a TNA regular). It was an overwrought end to an otherwise enjoyable match and solid enough showing for the returning Steiners.

The tag title match had played heavily on nostalgia in its promotion, with the emphasis on the Steiners recapturing their early 1990s dominance. A similar story of old versus new was behind Hirooki Goto's match with the Great Muta. Keiji Muto had continued to adopt the Muta role a few times a year after his departure to All Japan, but Muta hadn't been in a New Japan ring since May 2000. Goto meanwhile returned from CMLL in a main event position and was being groomed to win the G1 Climax later in the year.

The young warrior returning from abroad to face the most sinister of forces in the Tokyo Dome was in itself nostalgic. It evoked Jinsei Shinzaki's return to Japan from the WWF against Muta, and that match played heavily into video vignettes promoting Muta's comeback. Like the Hakushi and Muta clash, it was highlighted with powerful visuals; the light and dark of a decade earlier replaced by Goto engaging in a samurai movie like staredown with Muta on the ramp and an early assault before the bell.

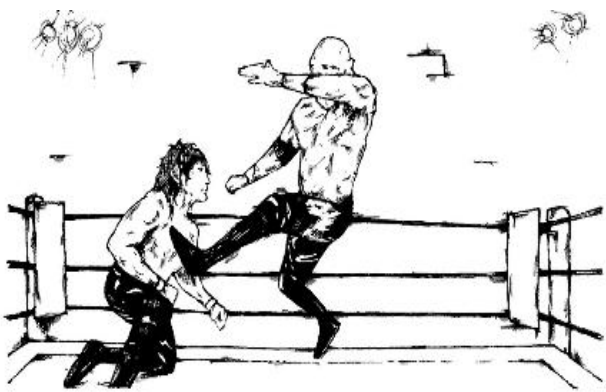
Like Shinzaki and Muta, this too was almost entirely Muta's match. Goto, frenzied to make a statement would dive at Muta outside the ring but would be shut off by a spew of green mist. Goto's metal staff would be used to cut him open much like Hakushi's *shakujo* was in 1996. Goto would lose to a moonsault, but like Shinzaki, his stature would, if anything, benefit as a result of challenging a Muto still shrouded in mystique, and a powerful kickout after taking three Shining Wizards helped.

For the preening and cocky IWGP champion, being above returning legends and invading Americans was important. 'This show won't be closed by Fujinami, and it won't be closed by Muto. It'll be closed by Hiroshi Tanahashi,' was the closing statement for a champion facing a Shinsuke Nakamura continuing to evolve stylistically and aesthetically. Now with long tights and an impactful Landslide finisher, he was changing radically while Tanahashi's was a subtler evolution.

That evolution had included discovering a mean streak in 2007 that would lead to a relentless focus on Nakamura's left shoulder; the story of his number one contendership match with Makabe in December. In the early going, both would exchange German suplexes as they tried to hang onto the other's waist, but a blocked lariat provided the opening for Tanahashi to go after the arm and shoulder. A top rope exploder suplex, a straight jacket German suplex and full Nelson slam from Tanahashi all found their mark, but after Nakamura kicked out of one High Fly Flow, a second only found the challenger's knees. Nakamura would strike with a Landslide from the top rope and a second in ring to become IWGP champion for the first time in four years.

Nakamura would close the show by facing down Kurt Angle and declaring the IWGP titles would be unified. 'The best thing is pro wrestling,' would be the last words of a show with two undeniably high quality main events; a show that press would argue 'showed a positivity and dedication from the wrestlers not seen in a long time.'[147]To go back to that field of dreams, it was being built. It was just a case of them coming.

2009



New Japan Pro Wrestling
NJPW Wrestle Kingdom III
January 4, 2009
Attendance: 40,000

RISE (Milano Collection AT & Minoru) & Taichi Ishikawa def. Kazuchika Okada, Mitsuhide Hirasawa & Nobuo Yoshihashi

Mistico & Apollo 55 (Prince Devitt & Ryusuke Taguchi) def. Averno & Great Bash Heel (Jado & Gedo)

Jushin Thunder Liger & Takuma Sano def. Koji Kanemoto & Wataru Inoue

IWGP Junior Heavyweight Tag Team Championships
Motor City Machine Guns (Alex Shelley & Chris Sabin) def. No Limit (Tetsuya Naito & Yujiro)

IWGP Junior Heavyweight Championship
Tiger Mask def. Low Ki

Legend (Masahiro Chono & Riki Choshu) & Main Event Mafia (Kurt Angle & Kevin Nash) def. Great Bash Heel (Karl Anderson, Giant Bernard, Takashi Iizuka & Tomohiro Ishii)

Zero One World Heavyweight Championship
Yuji Nagata def. Masato Tanaka

Jun Akiyama def. Manabu Nakanishi

IWGP Tag Team Championships
Team 3D (Brother Ray & Brother Devon) def. Most Violent Players (Toru Yano & Togi Makabe)

RISE (Shinsuke Nakamura & Hirooki Goto) def. Mitsuharu Misawa & Takashi Sugiura

IWGP Heavyweight Championship
Hiroshi Tanahashi def. Keiji Muto

2009's Wrestle Kingdom 3 felt every bit a sequel to Toukon Shidou three years earlier. The first big show under Riki Choshu's command carried with it a theme of New Japan taking on the world and often coming up short. In 2009, as Choshu prepared to withdraw completely from his role in New Japan, NJPW would take on its promotional rivals on a much more even footing.

This was a New Japan that was built around its twin aces of Shinsuke Nakamura and Hiroshi Tanahashi, while fleshing out the middle and lower ends of the card with a promising new generation. Yet with sales mostly flat under a Yuke's ownership that still wasn't spending to promote the product, its top two matches were built as a test of present and future against the past.

The year a wrestler turns 45 wouldn't ordinarily be the most active of their career, but Keiji Muto's 2008 had been an extremely busy one. After Shinsuke Nakamura was finally able to call the IWGP heavyweight championship an undisputed one in March by beating Kurt Angle, Muto would challenge and win the title from him in April. He would defend the title on major shows throughout the year against Manabu Nakanishi, Hirooki Goto and Togi Makabe, while still keeping a full time All Japan schedule, with the Great Muta as Triple Crown champion.

Hiroshi Tanahashi would step up to bring the IWGP title back to a full time New Japan talent. Tanahashi had idolised Muto, and immediately following his debut, would embrace his role behind the scenes as Muto's personal assistant. 'He didn't teach me anything about wrestling. That was a trade secret to him,' Tanahashi would remember. 'What he taught me was how to be a star.'[148]

Through 2008 that amounted to Tanahashi furthering an arrogant posture, declaring himself 'the ace of the century' and putting in strong enough performances to have many believe him. In a pre-show press conference Tanahashi vowed to be 'relentless,' against Muto, and to attack his knee 'until he goes home in a wheelchair'.[149]

It would be eight minutes into the match before Tanahashi used a

dragon screw to attack Muto's knee, but this would indeed provide the backbone to the match. Not to be outdone, Muto would seek to one-up Tanahashi's offense, using the same dragon screw, but from the apron to the floor and then over the guardrail. As Tanahashi hit a High Fly Flow and was clutching his knee, unable to follow up, Muto hit successive Shining Wizards as if to say his limb work had been far more effective. As Tanahashi finally took control, his ego would nearly overcome him. After a High Fly Flow should have been enough, the challenger would try to make a statement with another and only found the mat. Later though, he would hit the move twice in succession and definitively take his place as New Japan's Ace.

Tanahashi would call out Shinsuke Nakamura after the match, declaring that there was 'only one Ace in New Japan Pro Wrestling.' Yet the freshly crowned IWGP champion would not be the only one to be gunning for Nakamura in 2009. Nakamura would soon disband RISE and form CHAOS in its place, in so doing convincing most members of Great Bash Heel to turn on Togi Makabe. In the meantime, though, GBH was in a pair of high profile tag matches.

The Bad Intentions team of Giant Bernard and Karl Anderson (an LA Dojo prospect, Anderson would team with Bernard after Travis Tomko was let go by New Japan) would lead Takashi Iizuka and Tomohiro Ishii against a clutch of New Japan and TNA legends. While Kurt Angle and Masahiro Chono would get simultaneous submissions on GBH to win, Bernard would attack Angle after the bell to set up a Ryogoku match the following month.

Makabe and Yano would walk into the Tokyo Dome as IWGP tag champions. In their way was the same Team 3D that had faced them a year earlier, in the same hardcore setting. The symmetry wasn't intentional however; this was meant to be a three-way match with Hiroyoshi Tenzan recruiting Satoshi Kojima and adding a personal note to the match with Makabe taking on the spurned former leader of GBH. This wasn't to be, as Tenzan would suffer from a detached retina and receive emergency surgery a week before Wrestle Kingdom.[150]

The traditional use of tables and metal sheets aside, this was a fairly conservative hardcore match, one ending with a 3D to Yano after a miscommunication led to Makabe hitting his partner with a chain. More violent was Yuji Nagata's bout with another ECW alum in Masato Tanaka.

Tanaka had worked as a freelancer after his Japanese home of FMW

died. Bouncing between All Japan and Zero One, he became a full-time member of the latter roster during a feud with Shinya Hashimoto, and after his death, would be a standard bearer for the promotion. For his part, Yuji Nagata would shrink from the main event limelight as he entered his 40s, but would instead be NJPW's representative when facing other promotions. As New Japan's long feud with Zero One continued, Nagata would win the Zero One world championship in October from Tanaka; this was the former champion's revenge.

Tanaka would obviously carry his hardcore reputation to the big stage, while Nagata would continue what was becoming a tradition of bleeding heavily to open the new year. An ugly chair shot to Nagata's head would do the job for the champion, while challenger would bleed after a Nagata head kick. Tanaka would dominate the early running before Nagata roared back with a top rope exploder. Both would trade elbows and big suplexes, before Nagata would transition from Tanaka's Sliding D seated lariat to his signature arm bar. A pair of backdrop suplexes later and it was over; New Japan coming out on top of All Japan and Zero One on the night's card.

TNA was a good deal more successful than New Japan's domestic rivals at Wrestle Kingdom. Both GBH defeats were at the hands of TNA wrestlers, and Low Ki, who had started touring with New Japan in the autumn while working consistently with TNA in the States, retained the junior heavyweight championship.

A lower profile, but more significant win in the long run for TNA was for the IWGP junior tag titles, which proved to be the Tokyo Dome debut of all four involved. While Chris Sabin wouldn't carve much of a mark in New Japan other than as half of the Motor City Machine Guns, Alex Shelley would go on to make a significant name for himself as a singles and tag team wrestler in the promotion.

Opposite them was a former university amateur standout in Yujiro Takahashi, and his No Limit partner, Tetsuya Naito. Naito had been a lifelong fan before taking the Dojo route, and standing out as an attendant at ringside with his scruffy orange tinged hair. Forming a partnership with Yujiro, the pair would head to America and TNA, as well as extensively in Mexico, where the racist reaction of CMLL fans prompted Naito to begin opening his eyes with his thumb and forefinger as a mocking defense.

No Limit would join a busy junior heavyweight tag space when

returning to Japan, with Jado and Gedo, the Apollo 55 team of Prince Devitt and Ryusuke Taguchi, and the veteran team of AKIRA and Jushin Liger to contend with. With the endorsement and occasional interfering management of former Makai Club leader Kantaro Hoshino, No Limit had built somewhat of a resume heading into their first Tokyo Dome match as champions. MCMG would ensure they didn't leave that way and would start a six month reign with the belts, but with chants directed at him punctuating the silence from a largely flat crowd, it was apparent Naito had a strong future in front of him.

Kazuchika Okada had the brightest of futures in front of him, despite a humble outing to start 2009. On leaving middle school, Okada had gone straight to Ultimo Dragon's gym to train. Dragon would send the tall, good looking youngster to Mexico for further training, where he happened to meet a Shinsuke Nakamura in the country to work with CMLL. Nakamura would recommend Okada to New Japan[151], and after taking the entrance tryout for the Dojo, would effectively start his training again from scratch.

In a dark match before Wrestle Kingdom started, Okada clearly was a cut above his teammates in Nobuo Yoshihashi and the future Captain New Japan, Mitsuhide Hirasawa. While being sandwiched between Milano Collection and Taichi Ishikawa superkicks would end things for the young team, Okada was given the spotlight, especially for his picture-perfect dropkick.

Okada's mentor would be picking a fight with Pro Wrestling NOAH higher up the card. For NOAH, early growth had faltered after 2005. A 2007 corporate restructuring would lead to a series of misfortunes and poorly made decisions. As finances dwindled, so did attendance and TV ratings with NTV as broadcaster. The promotion would regularly attract only a 0.6% audience share in a 4AM slot, often preempted by drama reruns; NTV's Kansai offshoot Yomiuri TV would cancel their NOAH broadcasts in autumn 2008. The Kansai region was a hotbed for Giant Baba, and the cancellation of weekly wrestling broadcasts was a sign that an era was ending. In March, NTV would cancel their NOAH broadcasts altogether, ending nearly 50 years of TV history.

It was a different NOAH facing New Japan in 2009, then, than in the first half of the decade. That was perhaps exemplified by the RISE Team of Shinsuke Nakamura and Hirooki Goto getting a clear win over Mitsuharu Misawa and Takashi Sugiura in the semi main event of the show. While this would even the New Japan vs NOAH record after Jun Akiyama beat a (surprisingly spritely, with a huge missile

dropkick) Manabu Nakanishi, it's hard to imagine early NOAH losing such a high-profile match on away turf in their first few years.

The match was constructed around Misawa and Nakamura facing off, going elbow for elbow with Misawa coming out on top. Sugiura would do most of the heavy lifting for the NOAH team, however, having transitioned from monster junior heavyweight to solid heavyweight powerhouse. Sugiura was there to take the loss, however, and Nakamura would defend his company's honour with a cross armbar.

Nakamura would head to NOAH's Budokan show in March with Milano Collection AT, falling this time to Sugiura and his partner Go Shiozaki. On January 4 though, all signs pointed toward Nakamura picking up a high-profile singles match with Misawa before the NOAH founder's career wound up.

This wasn't to be. Misawa would wrestle his last singles match in April of 2009, a semi main event before 500 in the cramped Differ Ariake. Misawa was dealing with copious injuries on top of the pressures of heading a struggling company. On June 13 in Hiroshima, Misawa would take a backdrop suplex, apparently normally, but wouldn't get up, passing away at the age of 46. This was to be the last Tokyo Dome appearance of an iconic figure who not only made a significant mark on the Tokyo Dome's history, but on that of wrestling worldwide.

2010

New Japan Pro Wrestling
NJPW Wrestle Kingdom IV
January 4, 2010
Attendance 41,500

Seigigun (Mitsuhide Hirasawa, Super Strong Machine & Wataru Inoue) def. Jushin Thunder Liger, Kazuchika Okada & Koji Kanemoto

IWGP Junior Heavyweight Tag Team Championships
Apollo 55 (Prince Devitt & Ryusuke Taguchi) def. Averno & Ultimo Guerrero

IWGP Tag Team Championships- Hardcore Match
No Limit (Yujiro & Tetsuya Naito) def. Team 3D (Brother Devon & Brother Ray) & Bad Intentions (Karl Anderson & Giant Bernard)

Masato Tanaka & Tajiri def. Akebono & Yuji Nagata

Manabu Nakanishi, Masahiro Chono, Riki Choshu & Terry Funk def. Abdullah the Butcher & CHAOS (Takashi Iizuka, Tomohiro Ishii & Toru Yano)

Togi Makabe def. Mohammed Yone

IWGP Junior Heavyweight Championship
Naomichi Marufuji def. Tiger Mask

Hiroshi Tanahashi def. Go Shiozaki

GHC Heavyweight Championship
Takashi Sugiura def. Hirooki Goto

IWGP Heavyweight Championship
Shinsuke Nakamura def. Yoshihiro Takayama

New Japan spent the years since the Yuke's takeover quietly regrouping. The development of stars that would spearhead a resurgence in business and public thought was underway, and the quality of matches in ring was unarguable. Fans in 2009 would mainly be caught up in the narrative of Shinsuke Nakamura's CHAOS taking on a defiant Togi Makabe, his GBH unit reduced to just two members with Tomoaki Honma.

Makabe and Nakamura would engage in some bloody battles, most famously the 2009 G1 Climax final which saw the hardcore brawler

come out on top. More so than his 2010 IWGP title reign, this, and his emotional post-match appeal to the crowd, declaring in English ‘thank you,’ was the highpoint of his career for many.

Yet there was a lack of confidence when it came to booking in the Tokyo Dome. As finances still weren't turning around with slow merchandise sales and sparse attendance, cross promotional tactics remained the order of the day when it came to promoting Wrestle Kingdom. For Makabe, this meant breaking away from his CHAOS feud, which had of late involved a series of chain deathmatches with Takashi Iizuka (having changed names from Takayuki to Takashi, Iizuka would grow a maniacal change in character, storming through crowds and assaulting wrestlers with an ‘Iron Finger From Hell’, frequently resulting in disqualification).

Iizuka and the CHAOS crew of Tomohiro Ishii and Toru Yano would recruit a barely mobile Abdullah the Butcher to face a clutch of legends in Terry Funk, Riki Choshu and Masahiro Chono. An affair largely played for laughs, Funk would end up grabbing Iizuka’s iron finger and tossing it to Abdullah, who whacked his teammates. This would allow Manabu Nakanishi on the legends side to submit Iizuka with an Argentine backbreaker in a match that provided levity though little else.

The comic respite broke up an otherwise very flat undercard, highlighted by No Limit becoming the first team in history to have won both junior and heavyweight IWGP tag championships. That match took the form of the hardcore three way planned for a year earlier, albeit with members shifted. Tencozy’s reunion would have to wait, and on the GBH end, Makabe would face Mohammed Yone.

Yone had remained a perennial mid carder as a singles wrestler for NOAH, and mainly shone in tag team scenarios. In December, he and Takeshita Rikio took the GHC tag titles from Kensuke Sasaki and Takeshi Morishima, but as part of a high-profile singles match on Wrestle Kingdom, Yone under delivered. Makabe’s pre-match complaints of ‘who is this nobody?’ seemed tinged with some real frustration, though a quick victory with a King Kong knee drop hinted that bigger things for Makabe were mere weeks away.

The Makabe and Yone match was one of four New Japan versus NOAH bouts on Wrestle Kingdom 4. After Misawa’s passing, and with Kenta Kobashi entering the late stage of his career after making a remarkable recovery from kidney cancer, the company has solidified

around two aces: Naomichi Marufuji as a junior and Go Shiozaki in the heavyweights.

Shiozaki's match with Hiroshi Tanahashi then was billed as 'Ace versus Ace'. Tanahashi had put in a remarkable 2009, enough to earn him Tokyo Sports' MVP award despite missing time in the autumn and vacating his IWGP title due to a fractured eye socket. Shiozaki meanwhile had enjoyed a six month run with the GHC heavyweight belt in 2009, albeit one that only included one successful defence.

As NOAH's popularity declined, so too did their retention of a female audience. In New Japan meanwhile, the importance of courting such a demographic was only beginning to be seen. The good looks of Tanahashi and Shiozaki became a focal point of pre-match hype, both characterized as idols to female fans. This made an aggressive Shiozaki directly target Tanahashi's head and face for the most part. After dumping Tanahashi to the floor, Shiozaki would hit a DDT and then catapult his opposite number into the ring post, before laying in with slaps and chops learned from his mentor Kobashi.

Tanahashi would respond with a tribute of his own, though the New Japan star using Misawa's elbow combination and teasing a tiger driver would have been booed out of the building had the match happened on NOAH turf. Tanahashi would withstand vicious lariats and a beautiful moonsault from Shiozaki, before a Go Flasher would be countered into a Dragon suplex and a pair of High Fly Flows to give Tanahashi the win.

Makabe and Tanahashi's successes were both non-title affairs, but in championship matches, it was NOAH with the upper hand. Marufuji would beat Tiger Mask in a thrilling IWGP junior heavyweight title match. Toughing out offense from a Yoshihiro Yamazaki motivated by the last Dome match in his thirties, Marufuji would kick out of a Tiger Driver from the top rope and deliver a 'Tiger Flowsion'. The combination Tiger Driver and Emerald Flowsion was a fitting tribute to both roles Marufuji's mentor and former boss was known for, and an indication of what was to come as he assumed Misawa's mantle. Marufuji wouldn't defend the IWGP title in NOAH, but his defenses in New Japan were a chance to publicize the NOAH name as the green brand struggled.

Takashi Sugiura, Misawa's tag partner one year prior had ended Go Shiozaki's GHC title reign in early December. Sugiura would carry the banner for NOAH for the next year and a half, with his first challenge

coming from his opposite number in Wrestle Kingdom 3's tag match.

Hirooki Goto was in danger of developing an unenviable reputation as a nearly man. His G1 victory in 2008 was followed by a New Japan Cup tournament win the following spring, but outside of tournaments, his singles record was sparse, and often with high profile losses. This included a loss to Sugiura himself in summer 2009, and a second here over the GHC belt.

Sugiura would dominate much of the match, with a more striking based offense than the mat work he'd used prior. Goto would fire up with strikes and intricate rope work ending in lariats to the champion, but to little long-term effect. After a German suplex into the corner, Sugiura followed with an Olympic slam. Goto would kick out at one for a rise from the crowd, but would tap out to an ankle lock moments later.

Even as a freelancer, Yoshihiro Takayama was most closely aligned to NOAH through much of the decade. After spending much of 2009 in All Japan, his showdown with Shinsuke Nakamura wasn't promoted as part of the New Japan versus NOAH series on the show. At any rate, its presence on the card superseded any interpromotional rivalry.

This was to be Takayama's first match in New Japan for over three years. It was his first Tokyo Dome match in more than five, and a rematch of his IWGP/NWF title defeat in 2004. Takayama had wrestled a handful of matches in New Japan in 2006, but the major obstacle to his reappearance in the Dome was a stroke suffered after wrestling Kensuke Sasaki in the 2004 G1 Climax.

After the August 8 bout, which was as hard hitting as one would expect, Takayama would head to the trainer's room with the feeling 'something was up. I didn't know what was what'[152] What was initially suspected a thrombosis was in fact a stroke, and Takayama would be out until 2006; the culmination of head injuries from MMA and pro wrestling could easily have ended his career altogether.

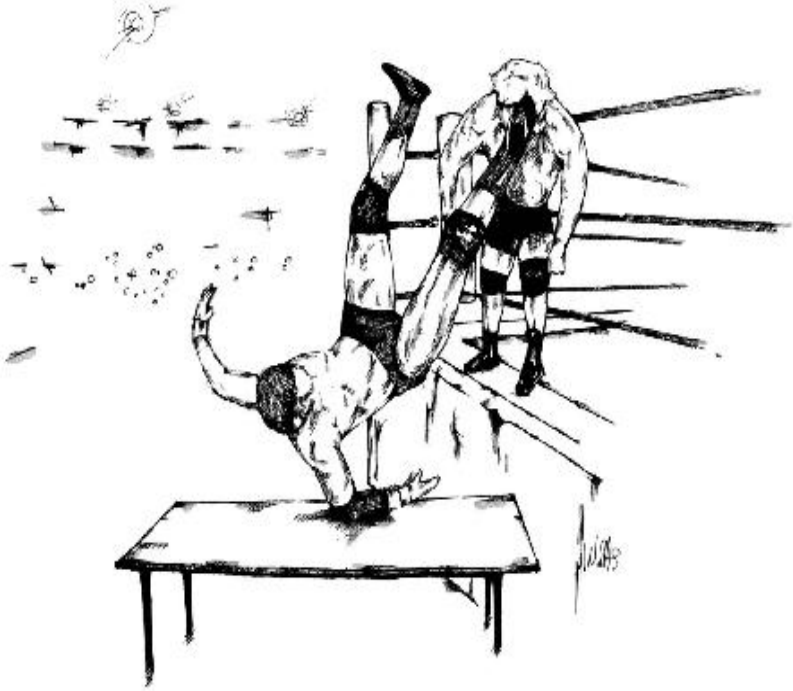
The Takayama and Nakamura rematch came as a result of Takayama wanting 'to know how far (Nakamura)'s come, how good he's gotten' since his days as the supernova. That would bring itself into the match, which felt like a direct sequel to Wrestling World 2004. Takayama would dominate early going with brutal kicks and knees. The challenger would again show his strength on Nakamura, landing a Dragon suplex from the ring apron back into the ring. When

Nakamura would attempt to replay the finish that won him double gold in 2004, kicking out of a German suplex and navigating an arm bar, Takayama this time stood and stamped on the champion's face, before connecting with a brutal knee as the younger man tried to shoot in and take him down.

Nakamura would show the evolution of his game, however. As Takayama would comment afterward 'before he was great at tying you up in holds, but that was it. Here his kicks and knees were brutal. He's gotten awesome'. Nakamura had recently adopted the Boma Ye running knee as his finisher, and after going (legitimate) punch for punch with Takayama didn't work, he would use his new finish four times to retain his title.

Takayama would raise his opponent's hand after the match; this rematch being six years in the making, it felt like a significant chapter in Nakamura's career had ended. 'The past is the past,' he'd exclaim as he closed the show. 'From now on, we, I, build the future.' Times were changing.

2011



New Japan Pro Wrestling
NJPW Wrestle Kingdom V
January 4, 2011
Attendance 42,000

Tama Tonga, Tiger Mask, Tomoaki Honma & Wataru Inoue def. CHAOS (Jado, Gedo, Yujiro Takahashi & Tomohiro Ishii)

Koji Kanemoto & Ryusuke Taguchi def. Kenny Omega & Taichi

IWGP Tag Team Championships
Bad Intentions (Karl Anderson & Giant Bernard) def. Beer Money, Inc. (James Storm & Robert Roode) & Muscle Orchestra (Manabu Nakanishi & Strongman)

La Sombra & Mascara Dorada def. Jushin Thunder Liger & Hector Garza

Hiroyoshi Tenzan def. Takashi Iizuka

Hardcore Rules
Rob Van Dam def. Toru Yano

Yuji Nagata def. Minoru Suzuki

IWGP Junior Heavyweight Championship
Prince Devitt def. Kota Ibushi

Takashi Sugiura & Yoshihiro Takayama def. Hirooki Goto & Kazuchika Okada

TNA World Heavyweight Championship
Jeff Hardy def. Tetsuya Naito

Shinsuke Nakamura def. Go Shiozaki

Togi Makabe def. Masato Tanaka

IWGP Heavyweight Championship
Hiroshi Tanahashi def. Satoshi Kojima

In the 1970s, New Japan moved from its founding in the wake of a rapidly crumbling JWA to labeling itself the ‘King of Sports’ and sowing the seeds for mixed martial arts. In the 1980s, the company moved from traditional booking practices of ‘Japan versus the world’ to building around homegrown stars and all Japanese matchups. The 1990s ended with a hard philosophical shift toward MMA, a reactionary move born out of fear at a growing martial arts market. The 2000s saw Inoki’s territory sold, a proud empire brought to the

brink of extinction and new owners seeking to help the company survive rather than thrive.

The start of every decade in New Japan history seems almost indistinguishable from its end. Yet the 2010s would see an era of cohesion. With a more stable setup behind the scenes and a strong talent base at the front of house, this decade's New Japan would slowly be able to pick itself up and become prosperous again. The decade's last Tokyo Dome shows weren't indistinguishable from its first; rather Wrestle Kingdom 5 seemed like an embryonic version of WK12.

Some leading players on 2018's show would have a coming out party of sorts as the calendar rolled around to 2011, though two weren't working full time for New Japan. Kenny Omega and Kota Ibushi had formed a thrilling tag team in the often surreal Dramatic Dream Team promotion. As DDT cooperated with NJPW, the Golden Lovers had seized IWGP junior tag gold the prior October in what Tokyo Sports would label the match of the year against Prince Devitt and Ryusuke Taguchi.

After a North American independent resume had earned him a brief spell in WWE's developmental ranks, Omega had fallen away from pro wrestling somewhat, and was inspired to have one last crack of the whip after watching the innovative approach to the medium DDT presented. While still offering traditional wrestling, DDT's unique take on the American sports entertainment formula also saw wrestlers compete on camp grounds and in building sites and was a promotion where a blow-up doll named Yoshihiko was a fearsome competitor treated with all seriousness by the rest of the roster.

It was in DDT that a handsome, mostly self-trained young star by the name of Kota Ibushi would make a name for himself. After falling in love with wrestling as a school kid, Ibushi had moved from rural Kagoshima to Chiba as soon as he graduated from high school. He would work as an attendant in Narita airport to eke out a living between training in K-2 kickboxing and finally making his pro wrestling debut in 2004.

Ibushi and Omega both shared a spot in pro wrestling's counterculture, and were gathering momentum as individual artists rather than tools of a particular promotion. In 2010, this had led them to success in New Japan and DDT, though with Ibushi's name more prominently in ascendance as Wrestle Kingdom V came around, the

pair would split up for the evening. Omega would wrestle the pre-show, while Ibushi was higher up the card.

Kenny Omega
We were feeling a stir and that things were changing. NJPW's cards and business strategy left a lot to be desired. The TNA crossover stuff on this show was brutal, just some of the worst stuff I'd seen on a big show. But this was one of the points that I realized I wanted to be with New Japan. I wanted to be on this team and show that we didn't need TNA stars to show how special we were.

Omega would be paired with Taichi, who had shunned his Ishikawa surname after returning from a Mexico excursion. Still without a sense of belonging in New Japan having trained under Toshiaki Kawada before going freelance, he would team with Satoshi Kojima in the autumn of 2010; Kojima having left All Japan to return to NJPW full time starting with that year's G1. Here he'd be rolled up by Ryusuke Taguchi, who was also in a strange pairing with Koji Kanemoto. The other halves of Apollo 55 and the Golden Lovers, as it turned out, would face each other.

Prince Devitt had a breakthrough 2010. Winning the Best of the Super Juniors in June, the Irishman would convert tournament success into capturing the IWGP junior heavyweight title from Naomichi Marufuji. He'd hold the title for a year, though Ibushi would stand in his way at the Dome. Ibushi had been Devitt's final opponent in the 2010 BoSJ, and while fans were eager to see two prime junior heavyweights at their best, Ibushi would suffer a dislocated shoulder and be out for two months. Their Tokyo Dome match was a do-over in front of a much larger audience.

Kenny Omega
I'd been at ringside for a few encounters between those two. I had the terrible memory of Ibushi getting hurt in that final with Devitt. I was nervous before the match, but was really happy they could show everything they wanted to a larger audience.

Kota Ibushi
At the time, I was still really young, and wasn't really mindful of what I could do and what I could put my body through. It was a case of having an idea of something in my head and going right

ahead and doing it. That's what resulted in my injury in the first Devitt match.

Coming in to the Tokyo Dome as a wrestler from another promotion, there was definitely a feeling I had to prove I was able to hang with the New Japan guys. In terms of the match itself though, I wasn't nervous at all, actually. When you're on a big stage you might express things differently because you're communicating to fans much further away, but it's actually easier to work that way. Smaller buildings make me much more nervous because everyone is watching close up, you have to be much more careful about the little things.

The end of match, involving Devitt blocking a springboard Frankensteiner from Ibushi and landing his Bloody Sunday finish from the top rope, would be enough to make anyone nervous. It was though, a scintillating end to a thrilling match, evenly matched competitors blocking each other's signature topes and quebradas, and when Ibushi and Devitt could take to the skies, they'd follow with a brutal brainbuster from Devitt and a gravity defying standing corkscrew and double moonsault from Ibushi.

If you had Kota Ibushi, Prince Devitt or even Kenny Omega on a list of future main event talent in January 2011, there would be little argument. Kazuchika Okada had bigger question marks. After a parting match with Hiroshi Tanahashi in March of 2010, he would go on excursion to Florida and TNA. A nondescript player in the company, Okada would play a support role to Samoa Joe before being called back for Wrestle Kingdom. Here, he would team with Hirooki Goto, as Goto would continue his crusade against NOAH's Takashi Sugiura, this time teaming with Yoshihiro Takayama.

Okada, with baggy black shorts and an ill-advised goatee, looked every bit a sidekick to Goto and nothing like a breakthrough individual talent. Entering with Young Lion like fire, Okada would deliver a twin dropkick to Sugiura and Takayama before fading into the background of an unremarkable match. Falling to a Takayama German, it didn't seem like Okada would set the world alight, and New Japan would agree, sending him back to America a couple of months later for further seasoning.

The New Japan and TNA relationship was heading toward its conclusion. After a failed attempt to compete with WWE directly on Monday nights, the now Florida based promotion was to be embroiled

in a long struggle for financial viability, while much of its big-name talent would leave. The last TNA influenced Wrestle Kingdom did little to inspire confidence in a flagging company, meanwhile. Two former WWE names would make a Tokyo Dome debut through the interpromotional connection here, but neither made a mark.

Rob Van Dam had made an impression in the early 1990s as a rare standout junior heavyweight in All Japan. In America, he would become the most marketable star for ECW during the latter part of the decade before heading to WWE, and at this stage, a lighter schedule with TNA. His innovative and spectacular athleticism was often shunned for his 'hardcore' reputation, which was on display in a nondescript plunder match with Toru Yano. Perhaps the most noteworthy aspect of the match, in fact, was Yano's mimicry of his opponent's thumb pointing gesture, and in Japan at least, 'Yano! To! Ru!' Would become a far more common name for fans to chant than 'R! V! D!'.

Jeff Hardy had sizable name value heading into Wrestle Kingdom, though mainly for his headlining WWE run. His WWE career had been disrupted on more than one occasion by substance abuse issues by this point, and while TNA would elevate him to champion status, his demons persisted.

Whether or not he was sober at Wrestle Kingdom, Hardy certainly appeared uninterested. A pretaped promo stating that he would show everyone 'the best match in Tokyo Dome history' was delivered with a monotone that didn't really befit a self-proclaimed 'charismatic enigma'. In the match however, Tetsuya Naito was in the ring with a sloppy and awkward Hardy who fell during early rope work and was unable to bring fans back into the match.

Naito would find himself elevated in 2011, but this was a bad start to his year. Hardy's 2011 would be worse; weeks later he would infamously appear on pay per view and wrestle Sting whilst plainly under the influence of opioids, stating later 'I couldn't wrestle… I went too far.'[153] Naito and Yano's evolution would progress, albeit in wildly different directions. For Hardy and RVD meanwhile, this would be their first and last match with New Japan, which, given Hardy's substance problems at the time and RVD's status as a marijuana advocate in a staunchly anti-drug Japan, was probably for the best all round.

It wasn't just the differing fortunes of future main eventers that gave a

Wrestle Kingdom V its prophetic air. Hector Garza, La Sombra and Mascara Dorada were on hand from CMLL to preview the first Fantasticamania tour in Korakuen later in the month. This would start a tradition that would run through the decade and grow from three days into a weeks long celebration of the lucha style in New Japan rings. La Sombra and Dorada would grow more active in New Japan in the near future before both moved onto spells in WWE; Garza would ascend to world heavyweight champion status in CMLL in 2011 before leaving the promotion and dying far too young from lung cancer months later.

The 2010s would also see the slow withdrawal of New Japan's 'third generation' from the main event scene. Yuji Nagata and Satoshi Kojima would have their penultimate career singles matches in the Tokyo Dome at WK5, while Tenzan would have his last. Opposite Takashi Iizuka, he would brawl his way to a submission win via an Anaconda Vice. Nagata was successful as well, after a rematch from four years prior opposite Minoru Suzuki, and a match that was nearly as intense, if not as bloody as that classic. Playing off the finish to their prior match where Nagata was punished for missing a head kick with a sleeper, this time Nagata would connect and follow with consecutive backdrop suplexes to emerge victorious.

Kojima would be less successful in his last Tokyo Dome main event. It had been a busy 2010 for Satoshi Kojima. In January he won the Triple Crown championship in All Japan, before relinquishing it two months later to super heavyweight Ryota Hama. In the spring though, Kojima would have to take time away, a cumulative effect of nerve damage in his right elbow. The injury came just when he was in contract negotiations, and Kojima would announce an intention to leave AJPW declaring he'd 'gotten soft,' working under Keiji Muto, that 'the younger generation are stepping up and I've achieved what I'd set out to,' and that he was 'seeking a new challenge.' [154]

Kojima's departure did not sit well with All Japan talent. This was especially the case for Suwama, who declared he was 'running away from competition,' and 'taking All Japan too lightly,' while planning a return to New Japan under the guise of going independent.[155] Kojima would only wrestle for New Japan during his spell as a freelancer, returning for the 2010 G1 and winning the IWGP heavyweight title from Togi Makabe in October.

The deposed Makabe would have a dramatic hardcore brawl with Masato Tanaka on Wrestle Kingdom V. When Tanaka ended Makabe's

2010 with a brainbuster through a table and a stretcher job for Makabe, furniture was to be a big part of their match. Ugly chairshots and forearms that were equally vicious would all culminate in a scary powerbomb from the apron through a table by Makabe, followed by a King Kong knee. Kojima's main event with Hiroshi Tanahashi was a good deal more orthodox.

The match was built around both trying to eliminate their opponent's finish; the challenger by working over Kojima's lariat arm, and the champion by punishing Tanahashi's legs to stop the High Fly Flow. The link between Kojima's opponent and his former boss was evident as Tanahashi would hit successive Dragon Screws to Kojima's arm after a Slingblade had been countered with a lariat.

Eventually Tanahashi would end Kojima's final IWGP title reign with a successful Slingblade and a pair of High Fly Flows. Tanahashi's fifth IWGP title reign would be a historic one; between January 2011 and February 2012, he would successfully defend the title a record eleven times. Tanahashi's declaration of 'everything's OK, Tanahashi's here,' was typical bravado, but there was an air of truth to the brag. Tanahashi would be a figure of stability in a critical time, as a new era would be ushered in both in ring and behind the scenes.

2012

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New Japan Pro Wrestling
NJPW Wrestle Kingdom VI
January 4, 2012
Attendance: 43,000

Captain New Japan & Tama Tonga def. Kyosuke Mikami & Tomoaki Honma

IWGP Junior Heavyweight Tag Team Championships
Apollo 55 (Ryusuke Taguchi & Prince Devitt) def. No Remorse Corps (Rocky Romero & Davey Richards)

Jushin Thunder Liger, KUSHIDA, Mascara Dorada & Tiger Mask def. Atlantis, Valiente & Suzuki-Gun (Taichi & TAKA Michinoku)

Kazuchika Okada def. YOSHI-HASHI

Stack of Arms (Masakatsu Funaki & Masayuki Kono) def. Seigigun (Wataru Inoue & Yuji Nagata)

MVP & Shelton Benjamin def. Complete Players (Masato Tanaka & Yujiro Takahashi)

IWGP Tag Team Championships
Tenkoji (Hiroyoshi Tenzan & Satoshi Kojima) def. Bad Intentions (Giant Bernard & Karl Anderson)

Hirooki Goto def. Takashi Sugiura

Togi Makabe def. Yoshihiro Takayama

Go Shiozaki & Naomichi Marufuji def. CHAOS (Shinsuke Nakamura & Toru Yano)

Keiji Muto def. Tetsuya Naito

IWGP Heavyweight Championship
Hiroshi Tanahashi def. Minoru Suzuki

'Otsukare sama desu'. It's a Japanese expression that doesn't have a direct translation in English, but is far from a romantic mysticism. It's a platitude, sometimes used in greeting, most often when a task is completed, or work for the day is finished. A 'thanks for effort', 'another day in the bag'. About as dramatic an utterance as 'see you tomorrow,' someone might say on the way out of the door, but a hugely significant line for Kazuchika Okada.

Hiroshi Tanahashi had just completed his record eleventh IWGP title defense. Facing Minoru Suzuki, the theme to the match was that the loyal New Japan ace was facing a true freelancer in his challenger. Tanahashi was defending the honour of the company, while Suzuki was arguing his loyalty was blind, and a mongrel pit bull in Suzuki would have the upper hand in experience.

Suzuki would call on that broad experience, with Fujiwara like head butts and his Gotch like mat style. He would punish Tanahashi for much of the match, with the IWGP title seemingly in more jeopardy than at any other point in the Ace's one-year reign. Knees in the corner would bloody Tanahashi's mouth, while there was no answer for Suzuki's rapid-fire palm strikes. After a long sleeper however, Tanahashi would kick out of Suzuki's follow-up Gotch style piledriver, and eventually lead toward a Slingblade and pair of High Fly Flows.

After Tanahashi just surpassed Yuji Nagata's monumental IWGP title defense record, Okada walking down the ramp and addressing his elder seemed like a comedown. '*Otsukare sama desu'*. It was a disingenuous, backhanded put down from the young punk who was far too full of himself. 'The Ace has protected New Japan for all this time, and now the Rainmaker is taking over'. A rote ending to the biggest show of the year.

The Tokyo Dome crowd were vocal in their dissatisfaction. Boos, and chants of 'go home' rained down on Okada, and not because of his audacity or character's disrespect. It seemed like the end of Wrestle Kingdom was being used to set up a minor placeholder twelfth defense for Tanahashi a few weeks later.

To be fair, one couldn't blame the audience in attendance. Wrestle Kingdom 6 was to be the big return for an Okada back full time from TNA. His second year with the company was sparse when it came to bookings; a few TV appearances and a lot of downtime afforded more gym time, and more time to radically alter his character from the Goto sidekick that had appeared a year earlier[156]. In place of the goatee and black shorts was a heavy tan, bleached hair, and lots of gold.

The Rainmaker was a mish mash of Japanese and American hip hop cultures, a young, new money brat weighed down with heavy jewelry. He promised to make it rain on New Japan, but his performance earlier in the night seemed anything other than befitting of a big player in the club.

Nobuo Yoshihashi was also returning at Wrestle Kingdom from his own excursion to CMLL. Dropping his first name and romanizing, he was now YOSHI-HASHI, the 'Japanese Rudo'. He would play a referee shoving, spitting antagonist, and was put opposite Okada for a 'double return match'.

Aside from the fact that it was a match between two obvious heels, it was a poor performance from both. Neither seemed comfortable in their new skins, YOSHI-HASHI commenting for his part later on that he would have to 'forget everything he learned in Mexico' in order to be comfortable in a New Japan ring.[157] Offense from both consisted of stomps and forearms, and Okada's Rainmaker finisher, still yet to be fine-tuned was a flat seeming side neckbreaker rather than an emphatic lariat. A pinfall victory for Okada was met with scattered boos, and it didn't seem at all possible that one month later New Japan would bet the house on Okada as champion, and win.

Okada and YOSHI-HASHI weren't the only two with new characters at WK6. The pre-show match would see a revitalized Mitsuhide Hirasawa leap into heroic action as the masked Captain New Japan. After departing Yuji Nagata's Seigigun (Justice Army) stable, Hirasawa would join CHAOS as Hideo Saito, complementing wild man Takashi Iizuka in tag matches. Saito would grow tired of the unjust heel unit and morph into the good captain, dedicated to fighting for all things right and normally losing. He was at least victorious teaming with Tama Tonga, who would pin Kyosuke Mikami, a Young Lion who had beaten Hiromu Takahashi at Christmas to earn the pre show spot; Mikami would soon undergo an excursion to Mexico and come back with a mask of his own.

Speaking of Seigigun, Yuji Nagata's stable was on the brink of disbanding. One of the final nails in the group's coffin would be a sudden retirement for Wataru Inoue due to neck issues, and as Inoue adopted a front office role in New Japan, Nagata would go back to being listed on the core New Japan roster. For now though, the two faced some surprising opposition in Masakatsu Funaki and Masayuki Kono.

Kono and Inoue were background players to the real story of Nagata and Funaki. For Funaki, this was the first New Japan appearance in 24 years, after his departure to UWF. His freelance career post Pancrase had eventually seen him in All Japan, where he would form his Stack of Arms stable and a tag team with Kono. Had Funaki stayed in New Japan in the late 1980s, it's likely he would have been a rival for Nagata breaking through, and their martial arts styles would have complemented each other perfectly. Circumstances prevented their meeting until 2011, however, and this tag match followed up on a pair of tag meetings and a Champion Carnival singles bout in All Japan that year.

It seemed like Nagata and Funaki were set to feud through the year in both New and All Japan, but again fate would intervene. After a brief and uneventful tag bout, there was a pull apart brawl between Nagata and Funaki to set up a singles feud that wasn't to be; a knee from Nagata in the match would fracture Funaki's cheekbone and he would take six months away. He would meet Nagata in a singles match on his return, but it was a one-off match in AJPW, and Funaki would never return to New Japan.

Another singles feud that never was could be seen in Shinsuke Nakamura and Naomichi Marufuji. Nakamura was a revelation in 2011, having completed his transformation from LA Dojo shooter to the King of Strong Style. Now with a unique haircut and eccentric mannerisms gleaned from a love of Michael Jackson and Freddy Mercury, Nakamura would ride a wave of popularity to a G1 Climax win. His opposite number was another dynamic and charismatic performer in Marufuji, and it seemed a natural fit for the two in ring.

Their match in the Dome bore this out, with exchanges between the two fleet of foot performers being the highlight of the show so far. Yet this was no singles encounter, including as it did GHC champion Go Shiozaki and the comedic Toru Yano. Yano was in the match seemingly solely to take a Go Flasher loss from Shiozaki, while the crowd was left wanting more from Shinsuke and Maru. This would

only come to pass the next autumn however, as part of Nakamura's long campaign with the IWGP Intercontinental title.

That championship was a new creation at Wrestle Kingdom 6. Born the prior spring, it was created as the centerpiece of a small collaborative tour between New Japan and Jersey All Pro Wrestling in the US. Its first champion would be MVP, a former WWE star who abandoned a contract with the wrestling giant in order to pursue a dream held since his fandom of Masahiro Chono began.

MVP's five month run with the new belt would be ended by Masato Tanaka, and with a rematch coming at an Aichi stop during December's tour, another potential high-profile singles match would become a tag bout in the Dome. Tanaka had been teaming with Yujiro Takahashi, who had broken away from No Limit partner Tetsuya Naito to adopt a sleazy pimp like character and form the Complete Players. MVP in return would recruit a fellow WWE alum in Shelton Benjamin, whose athleticism in leaping to the top rope and delivering suplexes would stand in entertaining contrast to Tanaka as he delivered a splash through MVP and a ringside table. Benjamin would garner big enough reactions to be called back for a strong showing in the G1 during the summer, though MVP wouldn't get another chance at the Intercontinental title.

It would be Hirooki Goto who was destined to unseat Tanaka as champion in February. After it seemed as if Goto failing to pin Takashi Sugiura was becoming an annual tradition, Goto finally vanquished the NOAH star and seemed like he had upward momentum after being lost in the shuffle over the last two years.

Tetsuya Naito seemed to be taking Goto's place as being thereabouts but never truly there. Nakamura's big King of Strong Style arrival in the G1 finals was at the expense of Naito, who would have a failed challenge for Tanahashi's IWGP title, and then forge an odd couple tandem with Tomoaki Honma during December's G1 Tag League.

Naito's match with Keiji Muto on January 4 was billed as 'Genius versus Genius', Naito having earned the nickname Stardust Genius for his mastery of the Stardust Press. It was a dream match for Naito, who had seen Great Muta wrestle Kensuke Sasaki as Power Warrior live fifteen years earlier while a middle school student; he went home convinced that he was going to become a pro wrestler himself.

Much like Muto's alter ego dominated Goto in 2008 however, Naito

couldn't seem capable of doing much damage to Muto. Taking over with a Dragon Screw over guardrails outside the ring, Muto had the vast majority of a match that did little for Naito. The younger star would garner a big reaction for kicking out of repeated Shining Wizards by Muto, but the veteran didn't seem troubled before winning with a moonsault. Naito would remain lost in the mix before suffering a knee injury during the G1 later in the year; an injury that would eventually prove to be beneficial for the future headliner.

Naito didn't seem to have a clear path forward, while Goto and Okada did. Yet uncertainty in the face of a new era was something the entire company was feeling. A far bigger headline than Okada's challenge to Tanahashi would make the rounds late on January 31 as Bushiroad purchased New Japan from Yuke's.

Bushiroad was a fast growing media company. With trading card games as its backbone, they had transitioned into promoting live pop idol events and airing Sunday morning cartoons. Its president, Takaaki Kidani was a huge wrestling fan, to the point of promoting a Bushiroad Wrestling event, where he himself appeared as a general manager under the name Danshoku Kidani (a play on flamboyant DDT wrestler Danshoku Dino). A handful of New Japan talents were at the show, and Kidani already had close ties with executives at Yuke's leading to Bushiroad sponsoring NJPW shows through the summer.

The close relationship between Kidani and Yuke's perhaps factored into the company writing off 800 million Yen in debt when Bushiroad moved to purchase. 450 million of debt remained, and Kidani would stump up a mere 50 million Yen (approx. 435,000 USD) for the company itself; all told, Bushiroad spent around 4.5 million US Dollars to get into the wrestling game.*[158]*

Cynical thoughts instantly went to portraying Kidani as a 'money mark' buying a promotion to play with as an ultimate expression of fandom. Two decades removed from SWS, the specter of Megane Super loomed once more. Kidani would defend his position, stating 'I come from an entertainment background, I understand the wrestling culture.'[159] Bushiroad would seek to treat New Japan like its other endeavours, treating its wrestlers as characters and multifaceted talents first and foremost. Kidani had a plan, but was himself wary. 'The next few years determine whether we succeed or fail.' [160] Nobody was saying *otsukare sama desu* yet.

2013

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New Japan Pro Wrestling
NJPW Wrestle Kingdom 7
January 4, 2013
Attendance 29,000

Captain New Japan, Tama Tonga & Wataru Inoue def. CHAOS

(Jado, Tomohiro Ishii & YOSHI-HASHI)

BUSHI, KUSHIDA & Ryusuke Taguchi def. Hiromu Takahashi, Jushin Thunder Liger & Tiger Mask

Muscle Orchestra (Strongman & Manabu Nakanishi), Akebono & MVP def. CHAOS (Takashi Iizuka, Toru Yano & Yujiro Takahashi) & Bob Sapp

NEVER Openweight Championship
Masato Tanaka def. Shelton Benjamin

IWGP Tag Team Championships
Killer Elite Squad (Lance Archer & Davey Boy Smith Junior) def. Sword and Guns (Hirooki Goto & Karl Anderson)

Yuji Nagata def. Minoru Suzuki

IWGP Junior Heavyweight Championship
Prince Devitt def. Kota Ibushi & Low Ki

TenKoji (Hiroyoshi Tenzan & Satoshi Kojima) def. Keiji Muto & Shinjiro Otani

Togi Makabe def. Katsuyori Shibata

IWGP Intercontinental Championship
Shinsuke Nakamura def. Kazushi Sakuraba

IWGP Heavyweight Championship
Hiroshi Tanahashi def. Kazuchika Okada

New Japan's first year under Bushiroad was mixed. A slight uptake in sales for 2012 showed signs of progress, but was balanced by over 300 million Yen in additional expenditure, with more promotion and the development and release of an NJPW branded card game, *King of Pro Wrestling.*[161]

Worries of just how successful New Japan would be with Bushiroad

deepened in the summer. The G1 Climax had existed to firmly establish Kazuchika Okada as the workhorse to carry the promotion forward. It succeeded too, with a string of great performances that put his uneasy redebut far in the rear view mirror. Before his crowning glory with a thrilling final against Karl Anderson however, Ryogoku fans, and a good number of backstage personnel, had a big surprise. As intermission ended, a pair of familiar faces entered the ring and addressed the crowd. Katsuyori Shibata stood in a New Japan ring for the first time in over six years; Kazushi Sakuraba for the first time in 16. Shibata took the house mic and declared 'I came here to pick a fight,' which seemed to be exactly what Takaaki Kidani was doing.

Reports would surface that Kidani had recruited the pair, who would tag together under the Laughter 7 name of Sakuraba's MMA gym, secretly and gave New Japan creative and management no warning. [162]Meanwhile, here were two freelance talents whose loyalty and merit was in question. Shibata wrestling Hiroshi Tanahashi in 2006 while under the Big Mouth Loud banner was more in deference to boss Fumihiko Uwai than Shibata himself, whose 'salaryman wrestler' comments still stung seven years later. Sakuraba had gone from being a player in the UWFi invasion of NJPW to making a huge name for himself in PRIDE, earning himself the 'Gracie Hunter' nickname for his defeats, one by one, of the legendary family. He'd had two pro wrestling matches, both for Antonio Inoki at Bom-Ba-Ye and IGF, since 1998. Was this a pair of wrestlers or MMA fighters? Was this Inoki-ism's ominous return?

Sakuraba would state that he was making a switch to pro wrestling mainly to team with Shibata, commenting 'There are no tag matches in MMA. (With Shibata) it feels like the old UWF days.'[163]Kidani meanwhile appeared bullish, stating from the outset that this was 'one of a number of things we're planning for January 4,' and that Sakuraba and Shibata's return would 'add some bloodthirstiness to the roster,'[164] while insisting that any ill feelings toward them from the crowd and other talent would only add to their matches.

The unilateral move on Kidani's part wouldn't be made again; steps would be taken to create a church and state like division between New Japan and Bushiroad, with Bushi handling business and promotion while in ring affairs were strictly handled in house. Later in the year, Bushiroad would appoint Yo Tezuka as president of New Japan on the business side, while Naoki Sugabayashi would move to a general manager like role and be more concerned with the product itself.

Sakuraba and Shibata, though, were out in challenging positions at Wrestle Kingdom 7, and managed to acquit themselves. Shibata's match with Togi Makabe was a high paced, intense and violent brawl, a clash of forearms, boots and lariats. Shibata would be on the receiving end of a powerbomb through a ringside table and German suplex from Makabe, but powered out at one to a big reaction before falling to a Makabe King Kong Knee. Makabe was transitioning into a different phase of his career, as in his 40s he would gain new fame on daytime TV, known for his penchant for deserts more than for his violent in ring style. He would remain a valuable promotional tool for New Japan who could still get the job done in ring. Shibata would benefit from the loss. After the bulk of the autumn was spent teaming with Sakuraba, he proved his worth as a singles star once more as he started to earn respect back from the fans and his peers.

With Sakuraba already well into his 40s, and with a stronger MMA reputation than Shibata, many were skeptical as to whether his Intercontinental title match with Shinsuke Nakamura could deliver the goods. Nakamura had spent the better part of 2012 as Intercontinental champion, in so doing ditching the original black and bronze belt design (something Nakamura called the 'ten Yen belt' for its resemblance to the dull Japanese coin). Nakamura made the new white and gold title belt almost as prestigious as the IWGP heavyweight title itself, for better or for worse; Hiroshi Tanahashi would later muse that '[Nakamura's] run with that belt right as he was peaking in popularity hurt him in a way(...) it pulled the rug from under him to not be right at the top of the card' [165]. Any fears that Nakamura's strong title run would be damaged were quashed when what followed was arguably the best match on a very strong card.

As someone who had shot to prominence as a hybrid Inoki-ist martial artist, and transitioned into an extravagant and energetic character, Nakamura was the perfect opponent for Sakuraba. He was able to bridge the divide between eras, and Sakuraba was more than capable of adding more pro wrestling sizzle to his own MMA steak. The story was one of Sakuraba punishing Nakamura for his martial arts rust; Nakamura would pop up to his feet after a German suplex and look to shoot in on his challenger to get blasted with an ugly knee from Sakuraba. Ultimately though, and critically for concerns of a resurgence of Inoki-ism, pro wrestling prevailed, and Nakamura would win with a pair of Boma Ye strikes.

Minoru Suzuki had straddled the same line between MMA and pro wrestling for years, and was transitioning from lone wolf to the cruel

leader of a fearsome stable. Satoshi Kojima's alliance a couple of years prior with Taichi was supposedly to bloom into a Kojima-Gun faction, but he was double crossed, Minoru Suzuki now leading Taichi, along with TAKA Michinoku and a giant tag team in the form of former WWE and TNA stars Lance Archer and Davey Boy Smith Junior.

Suzuki was to have his third and final Dome singles match with Yuji Nagata at WK7, a rubber match with both wrestlers tied at one win a piece. It was interesting to see what had changed in Suzuki over the years, slowing down somewhat and giving the spotlight to his underlings. Where spilling to the outside in 2007 had led to chair shots from both sides and brawling, here Suzuki was more cunning, using Taichi to distract the referee, and ensuring he had control on the outside.

In ring though, the story was that Nagata couldn't be beaten. He would break free of a front chancery to hit an exploder to Suzuki, and when his opponent shot in to lock in the sleeper hold that cost him six years prior, Nagata slapped away Suzuki and hit a backdrop suplex to vanquish his contemporary and long time rival.

The heavyweight tag team of Killer Elite Squad would fare better than their Suzuki Gun leader on the show. KES would beat Karl Anderson and Hirooki Goto, a team that had won December's World Tag League with little more motivation for being together other than 'we want the belts'. Goto, who had feuded over the Intercontinental title with Nakamura for much of the year, seemed lost once more, and Anderson seemed to be taking a step back to tag teaming after an impressive 2012 as a singles wrestler. The tag title match was a good display of power from the champions and technical ability from the challengers, but Anderson and Goto seemed lost.

In truth, Anderson would find new direction in the spring. Soon enough he would find himself at the ground floor of a global phenomenon, one led by Prince Devitt. Fueled by an 'all means necessary' rivalry to prove himself as a junior heavyweight capable of battling the heavyweight Ace Hiroshi Tanahashi, Devitt would form the Bullet Club. Yet one wouldn't know as much in January, where he would meet Kota Ibushi in a rematch of sorts from Wrestle Kingdom 5, this time with Low Ki in the mix for the first three way match for the IWGP junior title.

While lacking in substance as many three way matches do, it was nevertheless a spectacular display. The three managed to gel together

effectively toward the end of the match. All three would battle on the top rope for respective finishers, as Devitt's Bloody Sunday was countered to a teased Warrior's Way foot stomp, only for Ibushi to fly in with a springboard Frankensteiner. Devitt would get the win with his second successive Tokyo Dome top rope Bloody Sunday to Ibushi, and the typical booking logic would have pointed toward a singles defence against Ki in short order. The third man, who had wrestled throughout in a *Hitman* videogame inspired suit and tie wasn't pinned in the match after all.

Yet this was Low Ki's last match in New Japan. Two years prior, the Fukushima area had been struck by a massive earthquake and typhoon that would cause a meltdown at a nearby nuclear power plant and a massive environmental crisis. New Japan had been insistent on running shows in the disaster struck area, the source of some pride in the company. Ki wasn't comfortable with wrestling in the area[166], and the subsequent clash with management over the next month's major show in the area would lead to his departure.

Kota Ibushi
Three ways are weird. If I had to say one way or another whether I like them or not, then I'd say I don't. They're difficult for a wrestler and a crowd. A four way is a good deal easier and better for everybody because you can effectively split it into two singles matches, but with three it's very hard to make anything work.

MVP would also finish with New Japan at WK7, after a brief tag match that would see him comment 'never have I been paid so much to do so little'. His final appearance for the company was a feel-good moment however.

This was the Tokyo Dome return of Manabu Nakanishi, who had missed over a year due to a serious spinal injury. In a June 2011 tag bout, he would take a German suplex from Wataru Inoue and be temporarily paralysed, eventually returning the next October. Playing on Nakanishi's history in the Dome, he would be placed opposite Bob Sapp, whose celebrity had declined since his 2002 Spiral debut. Nakanishi would also team with another Sapp opponent in Akebono, while Sapp would partner with Takashi Iizuka. The CHAOS member had taken to abusing announcer Shinpei Nogami, ripping his shirt and spray painting his face on more than one occasion. Nakanishi and company's eventual win would allow Nogami to gain some measure of revenge with a very weak lariat to his nemesis.

MVP's 2012 tag partner was facing one of his opponents the next year. Shelton Benjamin would take on a Masato Tanaka, who had traded the IWGP Intercontinental title for the new NEVER Openweight belt. NEVER was conceived as a sub brand geared toward younger wrestlers as a chance for them to get more experience in front of smaller crowds. After some limited dates in 2011, the concept was put to bed for a year, before a relaunch, and a pair of shows built around a tournament for the new championship.

Tetsuya Naito had been earmarked to be the ace of the NEVER shows, but ran into a roadblock over the summer. During the G1, he suffered a knee injury that would require surgery and a lengthy recovery; he would persist until the autumn before a match with former partner Yujiro Takahashi would provide the backdrop for a beating that led to his time off. In the meantime, Yujiro's new partner Tanaka would hold the New NEVER title for much of the coming year. Now Naito had a natural opponent for his return, but the 39 year old twenty year veteran Tanaka didn't exactly fit the 'new blood' vision for NEVER. As a result, a strong if short match with Benjamin at the Dome was fun to watch until a challenger distracted by Yujiro was flattened by a Tanaka Sliding D, but few held the championship itself in high regard.

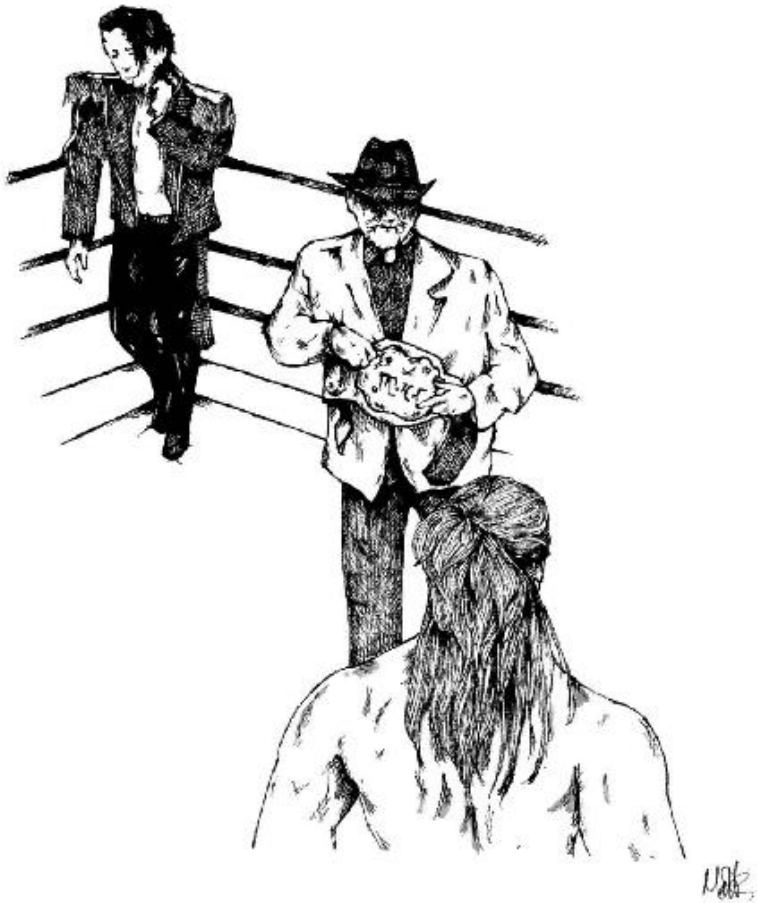
Hiroshi Tanahashi's battles with Kazuchika Okada only enhanced the reputation of the IWGP title. Okada unseated Tanahashi as champion in February in what came to be labelled the Rainmaker Shock. The young star hotshotted to the championship, moved into CHAOS and given the booker of the company, Gedo, as his mouthpiece, certainly generated a lot of cynicism at first. Yet by the end of the year he was called Tokyo Sports' MVP and with good reason. He was placed directly in main events, yet performed at a main event level through defences against Goto and Naito, a loss to Tanahashi, and a thrilling G1 campaign.

2012's G1 started a new convention of having its winner be given an IWGP title shot at Wrestle Kingdom, leading to a match that would end the second act in the rivalry between Okada and Tanahashi. Young materialism against a veteran's love of the game, it was a match of 'Love versus Money'.

In ring this amounted to Okada's flash over Tanahashi's substance and impact. Both would deliver focused attacks on a body part, but while Okada would go to the Deep In Debt, an intricate neck hold that clearly owed more to Ultimo Dragon's gym than New Japan's, Tanahashi would go for the simpler knee bars and dragon screws.

The match told a story of Okada's offence being less honed, and more hit and miss. He would counter a High Fly Flow with his knees but recoil in pain, forgetting Tanahashi had been punishing them so. Tanahashi knew just how to use his big offence with maximum effect. He would use a Slingblade on a long ramp run-up that evoked Masahiro Chono and Keiji Muto decades earlier, and at the end he would rub his more experienced status in Okada's face, countering a Rainmaker with a Slingblade and then stealing a Tombstone piledriver from the challenger.

Two High Fly Flows later and it was done. Money had challenged love and love had won, the Ace's superiority over the Rainmaker underscored. While they would be apart on the following year's card, it was clear the two were far from done with one another.



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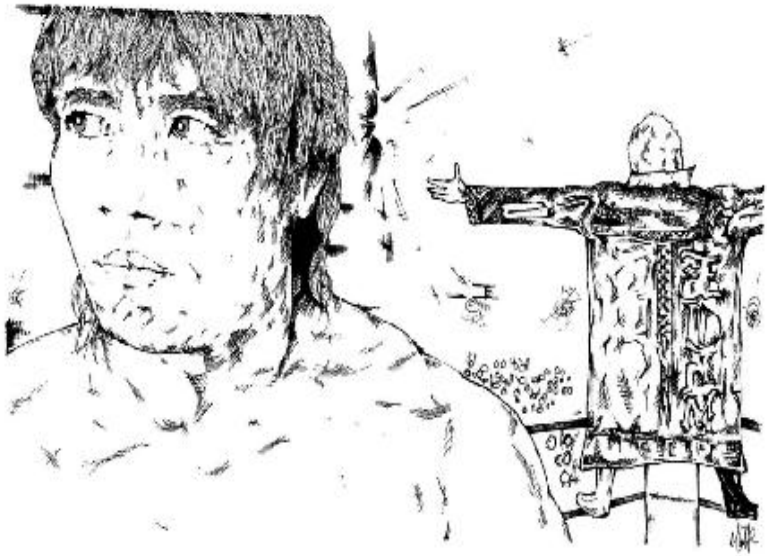

New Japan Pro Wrestling
NJPW Wrestle Kingdom 8
January 4, 2014
Attendance 35,000

BUSHI, Captain New Japan, Hiroyoshi Tenzan & Tomoaki Honma def. Jushin Thunder Liger, Manabu Nakanishi, Super Strong Machine & Yohei Komatsu

IWGP Junior Heavyweight Tag Team Championships
Young Bucks (Nick Jackson & Matt Jackson) def. Forever Hooligans (Rocky Romero & Alex Kozlov), Suzuki-Gun (Taichi & TAKA Michinoku) & Timesplitters (Alex Shelley & KUSHIDA)

IWGP Tag Team Championships

Bullet Club (Doc Gallows & Karl Anderson) def. Killer Elite Squad (Lance Archer & Davey Boy Smith Junior)

NWA World Heavyweight Championship
Satoshi Kojima def. Rob Conway

Kazushi Sakuraba & Yuji Nagata def. Rolles Gracie & Daniel Gracie

Great Muta & Toru Yano def. Suzuki-Gun (Minoru Suzuki & Shelton X Benjamin)

King of Destroyer Match
Togi Makabe def. Bad Luck Fale

Hirooki Goto def. Katsuyori Shibata

IWGP Junior Heavyweight Championship
Kota Ibushi def. Prince Devitt

IWGP Heavyweight Championship
Kazuchika Okada def. Tetsuya Naito

IWGP Intercontinental Championship
Hiroshi Tanahashi def. Shinsuke Nakamura

It would become the best thing to have happened for Tetsuya Naito's career. At the time, though, it really didn't seem that way.

Tetsuya Naito returned from knee surgery just before the G1 Climax. In the Bushiroad era, the G1 was becoming more of a tent pole series of events than ever. Expanding in number of wrestlers and shows, the tournament would become a big earning tour for the company, and provide towns further afield from the typical hubs of Tokyo or Osaka with big singles matchups. From a promotional standpoint, the G1 would be given ever more prestige, and lead directly into Wrestle Kingdom.

Naito made the hero's return in summer 2013, then. With the injured knee playing a big part in each of his matches, Naito was portrayed as beating the odds on the way to a final with Hiroshi Tanahashi.

Adopting the Pluma Blanka submission in place of the Stardust Press that was so damaging to his joints, Naito beat Tanahashi, but something didn't feel quite right.

Naito was now in his thirties, a hair too old to play the role of someone achieving a childhood dream. He was a smooth and exciting in ring talent, but lacked an edge, every bit evoking contemporary nearly man Hirooki Goto, or Masahiro Chono before his Lone Wolf days. Many crowds greeted him with welcome applause but little more; in the trend setting (or contrarian depending on your view) market of Osaka he was greeted with open hostility. The G1 final was a thrilling match, but it was clear Naito had far to go during the autumn if he was to be seen on the same level as IWGP champion Kazuchika Okada.

Yet Naito would spend the autumn tidying loose ends from before his departure rather than building toward Okada. He would set his sights as G1 winner on the NEVER rather than IWGP champion, beating Masato Tanaka and then Yujiro Takahashi to get revenge on the Complete Players. When it came to the Tokyo Dome main event, Naito versus Okada held little mystique by the time December rolled around.

Conversely, Shinsuke Nakamura and Hiroshi Tanahashi had a decade long history. Tanahashi, once so crushed and envious of Nakamura's early success, had arguably overtaken his rival. In terms of a championship resume, his eleven defence reign dwarfed Nakamura's times with the IWGP title. Yet Nakamura had made the Intercontinental belt a main event level championship, all but from scratch, commenting that 'this belt is now at least on the level (of the IWGP title). It might even be above the IWGP title.' [167]

Accompanied by a company statement that 'simply calling it a double main event will not be enough', New Japan and TV Asahi announced an unprecedented fan poll on November 11, 2013. Visitors to Asahi TV's website would be able to decide the match order for Wrestle Kingdom 8.[168]The result was a foregone conclusion. The dream Tokyo Dome main event that Naito had desired for 17 years was demoted to 'Double Main Event 1' while Tanahashi and Nakakura would be on top.

How successful the main event choice was business wise isn't hugely clear. The announced 35,000 crowd was a good deal bigger than the reported paid attendance in the 15,000 range[169], but even a one

third full Tokyo Dome was a far cry from the paltry 8500 paid that saw Nakamura first face Tanahashi, then inflated to 45,000 in attendance. Having crowds comfortably in the five digit range was a mark of success for the Bushiroad's ownership still trying to set a positive course for the company.

The announced 35,000 would start split between Okada and Naito, before settling behind the champion. A sub narrative to the match would be Naito being Okada's senior in the Dojo, only to see Okada shoot to champion status as Naito was still yet to find career defining success. The jealousy would emerge as the challenger rained headbutts on Okada, and laid in boots in the corner to scattered boos.

In control, Naito would land a tornado DDT off the apron, and lock in the Pluma Blanca, but a missed Stardust Press would effectively end things. The take home was that Okada was a step ahead; while Naito ducked a Rainmaker and tried to take the champion down, Okada caught his challenger and spiked him with a Tombstone, landing a second Rainmaker for the win.

It was a lengthy main event with a largely methodical pace over its thirty minutes, leading Tanahashi and Nakamura to have a brisker affair. While the story before the match was that Tanahashi's legacy had outgrown Nakamura's, the match itself put Nakamura on a metaphorical home turf with the Intercontinental title he had built on the line. Nakamura dominated Tanahashi, with every opening the champion left being firmly shut seconds later. At one point, Tanahashi avoided a charging Nakamura, but a follow up Deagon Screw over the ropes was blocked and countered with an enzuigiri. At another, Nakamura missed a knee drop off the apron leading to a High Fly Flow to the outside, but Nakamura killed Tanahashi's momentum with a triangle.

For all the superiority Nakamura showed, he couldn't finish Tanahashi. Successive Boma Yes led to kickouts before the challenger finally had an opening to exploit. A missed Boma Ye, a Dragon Screw and a Texas Cloverleaf, modified into a Styles Clash. Tanahashi would hit an emphatic High Fly Flow and become Intercontinental champion, though his reign would be brief and ultimately underwhelming; on winning the title once more in 2017, he'd comment on the failings of his first reign 'I treated the Intercontinental title as no different from the IWGP (heavyweight belt). I didn't distinguish it (like Nakamura had).'[170]

Both main events were undeniably exciting in ring encounters worthy of headlining status, but they came late in what was a very long evening. Extravagant entrances ran from the top matches, as Megadeath's Dave Mustaine played Tanahashi to the ring, and a troupe of pole dancers welcomed Nakamura, all the way down to traditional *koto* harps for Toru Yano's introduction of the Great Muta to face Suzuki-Gun in a mid card tag. Added on top of the matches themselves, and the spectacle made for a very long night.

It was a matter of fine tuning. 'Spectacle and strength are the two things combat sports need,' Takaaki Kidani would comment[171]. 'Without strength it's nowhere, but what we wanted to do was maintain that show of strength while building on the spectacle'. This was the core philosophy behind an evolution of 'Strong Style', a more narrative focused product, both in matches and in out of the ring developments that still maintained a nod to the classic New Japan underpinnings.

Bullet Club represented the new zeitgeist perfectly. A brash group of disenfranchised foreign talent that felt entitled to the spots established Japanese wrestlers were getting, they would draw an intense hostility toward them through 2013. Interference in matches was very evocative of the nWo years earlier, but with a harder edge, driven by Prince Devitt playing an intimidating gang boss. In turning from the hard working, smiling foreign Dojo product to a devious cutthroat mastermind, Devitt added a depth rarely seen in foreign wrestlers at the time. It helped for the Bullet Club's sake that he was at his peak as an in-ring performer as well, matching the strength and spectacle mantra Kidani had preached.

All the same, his bout with Kota Ibushi was definitely one where story overcame substance in ring. There was much to play on in this third Dome encounter between the two, but interference filled the first half of the match, and brought down a bout anticipated by purists. Devitt, who came to the ring in body paint as he foreshadowed the demonic persona he'd adopt in WWE later on, would get his comeuppance. As the referee ejected Bullet Club members from ringside, the IWGP junior champion teased blocking Ibushi's top rope assault with a top rope Bloody Sunday for the third match in a row. This time Ibushi landed a top rope Frankensteiner however, and connected with a Phoenix Splash to become champion. As Devitt slunk away, Ibushi was challenged by a Kyosuke Mikami returning from Mexican excursion as El Desperado, clearly indicating Devitt was finishing with the junior division, and soon with the company. For the new champion

meanwhile, a unique dual contract with both DDT and NJPW signed in October would mean a more secure, if demanding, future.

Bullet Club would have a bad night in singles matches while cleaning up when they could use teamwork. Togi Makabe would beat Dome debutant Bad Luck Fale (New Zealand native who emigrated to Japan to play professional rugby before entering the Dojo) with a powerbomb through a table and King Kong knee in a last man standing style knockout rules match. Karl Anderson would be in the tag title hunt with his third partner in as many years in Doc Gallows. Meanwhile, spectacle and substance matched in the form of the Young Bucks, another pair making Tokyo Dome debuts. They would capture the IWGP junior tag titles in a spectacular (if crowded) four-way tag; a match that would become a staple opener of the next three Wrestle Kingdoms.

Rocky Romero
I used to think these kinds of matches in the Dome were tough, but now I just think they're different. When you're in front of the (more casual) Dome crowd, they might not be as familiar with us because we're juniors, but I got to the point where I could predict how the fans would react and decide where to put what. Big moves off the top rope, superplexes, that's what would get the reactions we needed, but more importantly, it's the character stuff. If you're lucky enough to be in the shot on camera, taking an extra couple of seconds means that people actually have time to see you on the monitor. Other than that, the little stuff, chain wrestling isn't needed for that type of match because it will just get missed.

Katsuyori Shibata and Kazushi Sakuraba, both so high in the mix at WK7, had contrasting fates on January 4, 2014; Shibata having arguably the best match of the evening and Sakuraba undeniably the worst.

Shibata had the unique motivation of facing his best friend in a singles match. He had known Hirooki Goto since their days on the same high school amateur wrestling team (a team the two of them had created because their school didn't have one); Shibata would enter the New Japan dojo out of high school while Goto went through university before the two were reunited. The two would briefly form a tag team in the autumn of 2004 before Shibata's self-imposed exile from New Japan; on his return they were natural opponents.

Their matches in the summer of 2013 were electric, hard hitting and dangerous; the mind naturally went to other high school wrestling buddies turned pro enemies Toshiaki Kawada and Mitsuharu Misawa. One Shibata win and two double knockouts was the score in 2013 before the G1 led to another separation, this time as Goto broke his jaw and was on the shelf.

This was Goto's return match, Shibata's first move of which was to slap his friend across the jaw as if to test the mended bone. Shibata would take control on Goto and seemed to be pushing him to fire up, rolling Goto back in the ring as he tried to escape for air. When Goto did fire up, the crowd came alive as the two exchanged backdrop suplexes and powerful soccer kicks for counts of one. As Shibata channeled Antonio Inoki with an octopus hold, Goto would channel Riki Choshu. A series of lariats wouldn't fall Shibata, but a Shoten Kai did. Leaving with arms around one another, mutual respect was renewed, and a tag team formed.

Sakuraba was already in a tag team at WK8, and with a partner in Yuji Nagata that complemented his style well. Their opponents were less exciting. Playing off Sakuraba's 'Gracie Hunter' reputation, Rolles and Daniel Gracie were a logical stunt attraction, but awkward in ring. A gi assisted choke would earn a Rolles disqualification and a follow up no DQ match that overtook the Dome effort as worst match of the year for New Japan.

Strength and spectacle. It was a combination that was working as business continued to bounce back for New Japan, but there were more than a few wrinkles. By 2015, they seemed ironed out.

2015

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New Japan Pro Wrestling
NJPW Wrestle Kingdom 9
January 4, 2015
Attendance 36,000

New Japan Rumble
Yuji Nagata def. Captain New Japan, El Desperado, Hiro Saito, Jushin Thunder Liger, Manabu Nakanishi, Sho Tanaka, Taichi,

TAKA Michinoku, Tama Tonga, Great Kabuki, Tiger Mask, Yohei Komatsu, YOSHI-HASHI and Yoshiaki Fujiwara

IWGP Junior Heavyweight Tag Team Championships
ReDragon (Bobby Fish & Kyle O'Reilly) def. Young Bucks (Matt Jackson & Nick Jackson), Forever Hooligans (Rocky Romero & Alex Koslov) & Timesplitters (KUSHIDA & Alex Shelley)

Tomoaki Honma & TenKoji (Satoshi Kojima & Hiroyoshi Tenzan) def. Bullet Club (Bad Luck Fale, Yujiro Takahashi & Jeff Jarrett)

Naomichi Marufuji, Toru Yano & TMDK (Miley Nicholls & Shane Haste) def. Suzuki-Gun (Davey Boy Smith Junior, Lance Archer, Shelton X Benjamin & Takashi Iizuka)

Absolute Decision Rules
Minoru Suzuki def. Kazushi Sakuraba

NEVER Openweight Championship
Togi Makabe def. Tomohiro Ishii

IWGP Junior Heavyweight Championship
Kenny Omega def. Ryusuke Taguchi

IWGP Tag Team Championships
Meiyu Tag (Hirooki Goto & Katsuyori Shibata) def. Bullet Club (Karl Anderson & Doc Gallows)

AJ Styles def. Tetsuya Naito

IWGP Intercontinental Championship
Shinsuke Nakamura def. Kota Ibushi

IWGP Heavyweight Championship
Hiroshi Tanahashi def. Kazuchika Okada

While New Japan's business was still some way off of its 1997 peak, the Bushiroad ownership had turned failing fortunes around in a major way. A sharp growth in sales, almost doubling to 2.26 billion Yen in 2014[172] was cause enough to talk about a new 'boom period' for New Japan and pro wrestling in general.

While live business was returning to prosperity,with consistent Ryogoku sellouts and ventures into bigger buildings (with mixed results; moving the summer's Dominion event to Osaka Jo Hall in the shadow of the city's historic castle was a risk that paid off, a May 2013 return to Yokohama Arena for the first time since Hiroyoshi Tenzan's first IWGP title win was less successful), the overall NJPW viewership was a fraction of the 1990s boom. The peak years of 1996 and 1997 had a significantly smaller viewership than in 1982 of course, without prime-time TV exposure; the difference maker then was merchandising through T shirts and videogames. In the 2010s, it was a similar story; while the audience was certainly growing (and diversifying, as appeals were made to women and children), the real key was monetizing the fans that were around.

Merchandise, with Hiroshi Tanahashi, Kazuchika Okada and Shinsuke Nakamura as key individual stars was pushed to fans as fashionable and cool, rather than a mere statement of fandom. *King of Pro Wrestling* and a free to play smartphone game in *Puroresu Yaroze!* was a source of steady income from fans. In December a big play was made to not only draw more money from fans, but partly solve a lack of television exposure.

New Japan World was launched, a streaming service for live and archived content. It was, in part, a reactionary move, responding to WWE's successful streaming Network, and was launched with ambitious plans of drawing 100,000 subscribers in its first year. Yet as World settled into a long form project for the company rather than a quick success story, Takaaki Kidani would moderate his language about the program; while six figure membership proved elusive, World would still quickly become one of Japan's most successful streaming delivery services funded by 'maybe the biggest and best fanclub in the country'.[173]

World would also become a key tool in reaching out to a worldwide audience. As NJPW set its sights on international fans, Wrestle Kingdom 9 would be seen by more eyes than any other January 4 event, excluding sliced up matches from WCW and TNA crossovers. Fans would come to see WK9 on NJPW World, and uniquely, on pay

per view.

The PPV connection came with Jeff Jarrett, returning to the Tokyo Dome for the first time since Kurt Angle and Yuji Nagata squared off in 2007. This time, as Jarrett had departed from TNA, it was under the auspices of Global Force Wrestling. The GFW concept was to organise working relationships with promotions from around the world in order to provide talent for cheaply produced wrestling TV. In New Japan's case, this would lead to Wrestle Kingdom 9 being a GFW presentation on PPV to western audiences, with commentary from Jim Ross and Matt Striker.[174]

International hype was strong for the show, leading to a positive five figure buy rate in the States, though the English production was far from perfect. English and Japanese teams would trip over one another to the point that New Japan's approach to English would change over 2015. This would also mean not associating with GFW again, with WK9 becoming the extent of Jarrett's public output before his company would awkwardly merge with the former TNA (now Impact)[175], and Jarrett himself would enter rehab for ongoing alcohol issues.[176]

Jim Ross
At WK9 Matt Striker and I broadcast the entire event onsite without the aid of any producer in our ear counting us to various pieces of business. We did the entire show and never heard from anyone our headset one time the entire night. Very strange and challenging scenario.

As part of the GFW package, Jeff Jarrett himself was slated to wrestle, though his part on the show would have to be downsized significantly. Jarrett would attach himself to the Bullet Club, which had grown through 2014 to become a huge merchandise seller and in ring draw, particularly for foreign fans. In October's King of Pro Wrestling main event, Jarrett would interfere on behalf of new BC leader AJ Styles, only to be attacked by Yoshitatsu.
The former Naofumi Yamamoto had left New Japan for WWE in 2007, but after a fairly unremarkable run, was returning to his alma mater. Plans were for Tatsu to face Jarrett in a singles match on the show, but, during a World Tag League match, would take a Styles Clash poorly, landing on top of his head. He would attempt to continue with the tour, a move that could easily have proved fatal, before falling out for the next year and a half to recover.

Instead, Jarrett would team with another new BC member in Yujiro Takahashi, as well as Bad Luck Fale. Takahashi would receive a Kokeshi headbutt for a feel-good win by Tomoaki Honma, who had become somewhat of a lovable underdog during the prior G1. Also with a feel good win over Bullet Club was Hirooki Goto and Katsuyori Shibata, unseating Doc Gallows and Karl Anderson as IWGP tag champions. Meiyu Tag gelled as well as partners as they did opponents, and their GTPK (a reference to Shibata's friend and partner during his wilderness period, KENTA) finish elicited a huge reaction from the crowd. Unfortunately, their tag reign would only last for a month, and the team dissolved shortly after.

Bullet Club was more successful with their two big singles newcomers. After Prince Devitt left the group and New Japan for WWE in the spring, AJ Styles was a sudden replacement. Instantly challenging and beating Kazuchika Okada for the IWGP title, Styles was initially met with skepticism from a New Japan audience unfamiliar with the bulk of his American work. He was soon embraced though, through an impressive G1 campaign, and an electric feud with Hiroshi Tanahashi, who would remark on how he'd progressed as a talent. 'He always had a lot of moves,' Tanahashi would comment, 'but now he does everything with a reason, a focus. He really is the best in the world.'[177]

The 'best in the world' would face a Tetsuya Naito who had struggled through 2014 after his loss to Okada at WK8. Naito would show more fire early on than in the prior year's title match, charging at Styles early and hitting a big dropkick off the apron, but would get caught in the end attempting a top rope Frankensteiner, and dropped with a Styles Clash off the second rope. The win for Styles would earn him a title challenge and, indeed a win, shortly afterward, while Naito would seem lost in the mix once more until a fateful trip to Mexico.

Also new to Bullet Club was Kenny Omega. After several years making guest appearances for New Japan while primarily working for All Japan and DDT, Omega signed a full time contract in the autumn. Undergoing a radical change to his character, the happy go lucky babyface with an ability to reach out to Japanese crowds thanks to his mastery of the language was out. In his place was an amalgam of video game and 1980s action movie antagonists, who refused to speak anything but English, and was quickly aligned with the Bullet Club, despite some reservations on Omega's part, especially on being a junior heavyweight.

Kenny Omega
I was worried about how it was going to be perceived by the fans. Even the general perception of foreigners it was kind of like 'foreigner coming? Yup, for sure he's Bullet Club.' And they always were! Without fail! I was hoping to have a more shocking reveal even though the way it eventually played out went quite well.

I've always had my sights set on the heavyweight division and I've always wanted to compete head to head with Kota Ibushi. Having to start from the juniors and 'graduate' was an arduous journey, but I don't regret that time at all. I think it really gave me time to find myself.

Omega would instantly find himself in a program with Ryusuke Taguchi, who was himself finding a new direction. After his tag team with Prince Devitt dissolved, he would find a hard time settling on a character of his own before a fateful match between KUSHIDA (a long time independent on the Mexican and Japanese scene who transitioned to becoming a successful junior heavyweight for NJPW) and Kota Ibushi in Korakuen Hall. Ibushi was accidentally knocked out during the match and suffered a significant concussion. KUSHIDA would beat Ibushi for the IWGP junior heavyweight title, but only as a stop gap thanks to the injury Ibushi sustained in the match. Taguchi would win the title soon after, becoming, as innuendo would have it, the 69th champion in the title's history.

This little naughty statistic would see Taguchi modify his 'Funky Weapon' character into something more risqué, a character who walked the line between slightly naughty fun and outright suggestiveness. His interviews would be laden with double entendre, and his style would become more comedic, even though this would relegate him to more of a midcard status. ('It's high risk, no reward,' he would later quip).[178] The resulting title match was certainly not without comedy, as Omega would assault Taguchi with medical spray, and miming a chainsaw as he drove his forearm into Taguchi's face, having 'shaved his arm to grow stubble'. Omega would win with his new One Wing Angel finish, starting a run of dominance with the belt through 2015.

As Bullet Club was expanding, Suzuki Gun was getting ready to leave New Japan. As Pro Wrestling NOAH continued to struggle through financial issues, Bushiroad stepped in. NOAH wrestlers were licensed for the *King of Pro Wrestling* card game, talent like Toru Yano and Yuji

Nagata would be loaned to the promotion, and Jado would be sent over to handle the company's creative direction.[179] In January, Suzuki Gun in its entirety would head to NOAH, where they would stay for two years. Toru Yano would spark the shift, recruiting Naomichi Marufuji and promising Australian tag team TMDK for an eight-man tag against a Suzuki Gun team they'd quickly beat, while Minoru Suzuki himself would leave in more triumphant form.

Kazushi Sakuraba was entering his last full year with New Japan and would be in fine form for much of 2015. Having settled into an optimum blend of pro wrestling and MMA styles, he would have a particularly strong outing with Shibata in the summer, though his effort with Suzuki was a fine way to start the year.

Suzuki's history with UWF, and his appearance on the U-Cosmos Tokyo Dome show in 1989 was a big part of promotion for this affair. Knockout or submission were to be the only routes to victory in a match that nodded at the original UWF rules, though took a more modern style in practice. As the two fought on the ramp, Suzuki would look for a penalty kick to Saluraba's face but instead find himself in a Kimura. This would lead to Suzuki dramatically firing up on Sakuraba in ring, daring his opponent to kick his injured arm as he slapped away with his functioning limb. Suzuki would lock in a sleeper for the victory, and the two would embrace as the original UWF theme tune played; when Suzuki would return, he would be much less heroic.

The Suzuki and Sakuraba clash was one of three matches that most had the Tokyo Dome crowd invested. It was the top two matches on the card though that would really blow fans away. Ibushi would return from his concussion in the autumn as a heavyweight, and when Shinsuke Nakamura said he'd 'run through the deck' of challengers for the Intercontinental title and wanted 'a joker to step up', Ibushi filled the role.

Kota Ibushi
Working with DDT and New Japan served two purposes for me. DDT was fun, entertaining wrestling, and New Japan was pure and athletic. For that athletic side, there was no better opponent for me than Shinsuke Nakamura. His offensive style, and the way he sold, he was just perfectly matched to my mindset. He's my favourite opponent and this was my favourite match.

Both Nakamura and Ibushi were promoted as innovators who wanted

to change the face of pro wrestling, but who had different approaches to doing so. Nakamura had evolved 'Strong Style', and merged his MMA training with western extravagance. He respected Ibushi's ability to do the same, but decried his DDT work, his matches in campgrounds and against anthropomorphic blowup dolls.

In the match then, Ibushi would attempt to push Nakamura's buttons, borrowing his mannerisms and vibration facewash in the corner. Nakamura for his part would evoke the same derisory attitude he had on first forming CHAOS, paintbrushing Ibushi with his boot to get Ibushi to fire up with palm strikes. The action was strong until Ibushi missed a Phoenix Splash and Nakamura replied with a Boma Ye, which was when the bout kicked up several gears.

As Ibushi rolled to the apron, Nakamura would land ugly kicks to Ibushi's head unseen since Naoya Ogawa and Shinya Hashimoto. Back inside, the two traded legitimate punches, and when Ibushi was caught in a cross armbreaker, he would escape by standing and simply stamping on his opponent's face. Ibushi would hit his own Boma Ye, but would only receive a one count; when Nakamura tried his version, Ibushi leapt in the air and caught him with a double stomp.

The Intercontinental champion withstood a springboard German suplex from the apron into the ring and hit a Boma Ye from the second rope. Ibushi popped up with a wide grin, believing he could deliver Nakamura's knee better. They charged at one another and clashed knees, but Nakamura's proved stronger, and after a final Boma Ye, Nakamura was victorious.

Kota Ibushi
I think the length was what the match had going for it, the pace. I think a lot of main event talents, Okada, Naito, they're insecure in a way. They feel that if their matches don't go long, don't last thirty minutes, that they won't be able to get the audience on their side. They want to give people their money's worth, but it comes at the expense of something. I think this was just the right length, just the right pace, and with the right person. I never spoke with Nakamura beforehand, we just went by feel, totally by feel. I think if we hadn't it wouldn't have been quite as special.

'Unreal!' was Nakamura's post-match comment, and it was hard for the Tokyo Dome crowd to disagree. Not since Mitsuharu Misawa and Toshiaki Kawada ten years earlier had such a well-established and

built main event had to follow one of the greatest in ring performances of all time, but that was the position Okada and Tanahashi would be in.

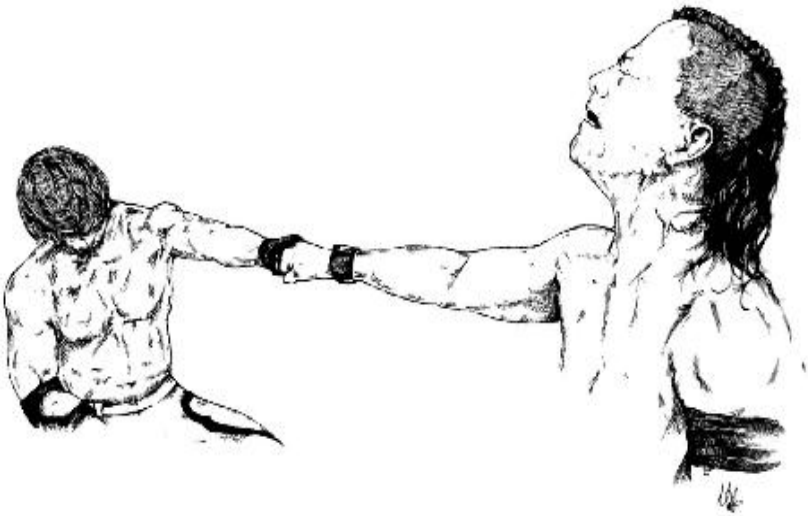
The story of Okada and Tanahashi in 2013 was love triumphing over money, the undying soul of New Japan withstanding corporate modernity. Two years on, and under Tanahashi, New Japan was emerging from its dark ages. Okada would applaud Tanahashi's indefatigable carrying of the company, but argued that now, truly, the IWGP champion's work was done, and by beating him at the Tokyo Dome, the Okada era could truly begin in earnest.

The two years since their last Dome meeting, and a hint of jealousy at being voted out of the main event spot in 2014, had changed Okada. His usual clean break in the ropes with a patronizing pat on the chest was replaced with a hard elbow to Tanahashi's jaw early on as the challenger trimmed the fat of preening and posing to the crowd and delivered a focused intensity. Meanwhile, it was Tanahashi who seemed flashy and cocky, strutting up the ramp and strumming an air guitar before running up to hit Okada, only to be struck with Heavy Rain.

When Okada finally did allow himself a moment to stroke the ego, striking his Rainmaker pose in ring, Tanahashi would take over. As Okada found himself outside, Tanahashi would deliver a High Fly Flow out over the guardrail to the floor. Back inside, Okada would roll through a cross body and power the champion up to a Tombstone position, but would get reversed and dropped. A roar went up as Okada kicked out of two successive High Fly Flows, gasps of shock as Tanahashi teased a Rainmaker, doubled when Okada countered it with the original only to have the champion kick out; a first.

Tanahashi would hit repeated dragon screws to a floored Okada before heading up to the top rope again. This time Okada would be unable to stand from the High Fly Flows that would see the champion retain. Okada, humbled, would leave the ring in tears, while a further emboldened Tanahashi would repeat the same claim he made when his younger rival first stepped forward to challenge him: 'you're a long way from being IWGP worthy'. All signs had pointed to Okada overthrowing Tanahashi, but the Wrestle Kingdom 9 main event was instead a twist in a tale that would resolve itself the next year.

2016



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New Japan Pro Wrestling
NJPW Wrestle Kingdom 10
January 4, 2016
Attendance 25,204

New Japan Rumble
Jado def. Captain New Japan, Cheeseburger, Hiro Saito, Hiroyoshi Tenzan, Jushin Thunder Liger, Kazushi Sakuraba, King Haku, Manabu Nakanishi, Mascara Dorada, Ryusuke Taguchi, Satoshi Kojima, Shiro Koshinaka, Great Kabuki, Tiger Mask, YOSHI-HASHI, Yoshiaki Fujiwara & Yuji Nagata

IWGP Junior Heavyweight Tag Team Championships
Young Bucks (Matt Jackson & Nick Jackson) def. ReDragon (Bobby Fish & Kyle O'Reilly), Roppongi Vice (Rocky Romero & Beretta) & Matt Sydal & Ricochet

NEVER Openweight Six Man Tag Team Championships
Toru Yano & The Briscoe Brothers (Mark Briscoe & Jay Briscoe) def. Bullet Club (Bad Luck Fale, Tama Tonga & Yujiro Takahashi)

ROH World Championship
Jay Lethal def. Michael Elgin

IWGP Junior Heavyweight Championship
KUSHIDA def. Kenny Omega

IWGP Tag Team Championship
Great Bash Heel (Tomoaki Honma & Togi Makabe) def. Bullet Club (Doc Gallows & Karl Anderson)

Hirooki Goto def. Tetsuya Naito

NEVER Openweight Championship
Katsuyori Shibata def. Tomohiro Ishii

IWGP Intercontinental Championship
Shinsuke Nakamura def. AJ Styles

IWGP Heavyweight Championship
Kazuchika Okada def. Hiroshi Tanahashi

For all of Hiroshi Tanahashi's domination of the main event spot on the biggest show of the year, and amazing performances in that role, Wrestle Kingdom had become Shinsuke Nakamura's event. The surprising and fresh display with Kazushi Sakuraba. The Intercontinental championship match with Tanahashi that beat the IWGP title to the main event. The all-time level matchup with Kota Ibushi. Every year, Nakamura was at the center of conversation come January 5. 2016 would be no different; this time though, they weren't

talking about the match.

Not that the match with AJ Styles for Nakamura's Intercontinental title was a bad one. It would have been very hard for it to, though an injury to Styles' back had raised questions. Nakamura's challenger found himself all but immobile after facing him and Tomohiro Ishii in December, abruptly pulling out of the World Tag League tour with a lower back injury[180]. The injury would be minor enough for a heavily promoted dream match to go ahead, and for Styles' back to heavily factor into the story told.

Styles would use the injury to lure Nakamura in and go on the offense in the match, though when the Intercontinental champion was in charge, the back was the focus. A low-slung neck breaker and a charge into the guardrail would mean Styles would be unable to follow up after gaining momentum with a springboard forearm.

As Nakamura sought to end the match with a pair of Boma Yes, Styles kicked out at one on the first and delivered a Sakuraba like knee to break up the second. Nakamura would transition from the back to the arm as he navigated a cross armbreaker, leading to the spectacular sight of Styles standing and delivering a one-armed Styles Clash. Yet ego would get the better of the challenger; rather than use another Styles Clash, he attempted to try the move off the top rope, leading to a revived Nakamura fighting Styles off and landing a decisive Boma Ye. After the match, Nakamura would extend a fist to Styles. The fist bump was a mark of respect and of unity; the next day the world found out they were united in leaving the company for WWE.

Nakamura had formed a firm friendship with Prince Devitt during his time in New Japan. When Devitt, having held out for a couple of years, finally accepted an offer to head to WWE, Nakamura was the first person he confided in[181]. When WWE's NXT Takeover show in summer 2015 coincided with New Japan's post G1 Climax down time and a cross promoted tour with Ring of Honor, Nakamura attended as a guest. The meetings with Devitt and WWE officials in the States all but solidified a decision to take on the challenge of a stint in America.

Nakamura headed into a meeting with Naoki Sugabayashi on Christmas Eve 2015 with his mind made up that he was leaving; that no amount of money or level of position would change his mind. Nakamura would remember of the conversation: 'He said to me "you've really got your heart set on doing this, huh? Then go ahead."'[182] Nakamura had felt he'd achieved all he could in New

Japan, especially as Intercontinental champion; citing a desire to challenge himself, he'd tearfully say it was a ‘now or never’ move.[183]

While four months in the making, Nakamura’s exit, scheduled for the end of the month, was still seen as an expensive shock. Questions were raised as to who would fill his position at the top of cards as Intercontinental champion, and just what would replace Nakamura’s merchandise at the top of best seller lists. His departure was likened to that of Keiji Muto in 2002, albeit under better terms; certainly Nakamura was an instrumental figure leaving while still a key draw.

Rumours had been circling around AJ Styles for months before Wrestle Kingdom as well. His departure, finishing with NJPW on January 5th, compounded the shock of the Nakamura news; Doc Gallows and Karl Anderson joining Styles having lost the IWGP tag titles to Great Bash Heel the night before was the icing on the unfortunate cake for New Japan.

Styles was the top foreign star in a company that was making waves outside of Japan. Wrestle Kingdom 9’s pay per view airing continued a wave of momentum for New Japan abroad, and international appeal was to be a tent pole of NJPW’s business plan going forward. New Japan would air an English version of its *World Pro Wrestling Returns* show in the US on AXS TV, and English commentary would be added to the NJPW World service.

The commentary was not without its hiccups initially; while Kevin Kelly would become a highly credible and knowledgeable announcer, he was unfamiliar with the product in his early outings. At WK10, he would be joined by Matt Striker, and, with the intent of having an analyst who could explain Japanese promos and stories, Yoshitatsu. Tatsu’s time behind the announce desk could generously be described as challenging, however; his English ability was nowhere good enough to handle a long live broadcast, and he'd also admit to being distracted, rueing ‘it’s hard to watch when you know you want to be in there. It was hard to watch Styles and agree that he's such a fantastic wrestler when he's the one that injured me,’[184]

The foreign roster was bolstered with a strengthened alliance with Ring of Honor in the US. Talent exchanges that had facilitated the appearance of tag teams ReDragon and the Briscoe brothers (who would debut alongside Toru Yano and become inaugural NEVER six man champions at WK 10) would expand into NJPW running more cross promotional shows with ROH in America and in Japan, as a pair

of Honor Rising shows were added to the Korakuen Hall calendar and presented an Americanized version of the existing CMLL Fantasticamania cards. Despite all this, however, the percentage of overseas NJPW World subscribers remained low, and Styles' loss hurt as a western star that was marketed as an NJPW talent first and foremost as opposed to an ROH wrestler who made occasional appearances in Japan.

Yet crisis sparks opportunity. News of the talent exodus on January 5 was met with alarm by many, but would become a turning point in the career of Kenny Omega. After a year in the IWGP junior heavyweight title mix, Omega found himself opposite KUSHIDA at WK10. KUSHIDA had evolved to one of the most technically proficient and internationally prolific junior heavyweights on the scene by 2015. His road to the junior heavyweight title via a Best of the Super Juniors win in the summer was a dream come true for a lifelong fan who grew up on a diet of Jushin Thunder Liger matches; his challenging the aloof Omega was 'the simplest story on the card; straight up good versus evil.'[185]

The devious Omega would obviously have the numbers advantage as he was accompanied by the Young Bucks; attempting to redress the balance while in Doc Brown cosplay in deference to *Back to the Future* fan KUSHIDA was Ryusuke Taguchi. Taguchi would quickly find himself neutralized however, leading to KUSHIDA battling from underneath for the majority of the match. KUSHIDA would use his technical ability to damage the arm of Omega, while champion would use raw power on his challenger. As his arm hung useless, Omega would land an impressive one-armed powerbomb on KUSHIDA, before hitting his V Trigger knee. KUSHIDA would roll through a One Wing Angel attempt however, and catch Omega with a sudden three count.

Any momentum Omega might have lost was replaced the next night, and then some. Omega would team with Styles and score a shocking pinfall on Nakamura, before declaring himself a heavyweight, challenging for the Intercontinental title, and assaulting his partner. Omega's ascent had begun.

Kenny Omega
I'd heard a rumour toward the end of December that those guys were leaving, but never wanted to put too much stock in it until I heard directly from them. The truth varied a lot from the rumour in the end, but ultimately, yeah, they left. It was only the day before the Dome that everything was confirmed, the whole plan.

Actually, had all that not happened, I would still have been a junior, and was actually pencilled in to rematch with KUSHIDA again in February. The birth of the Elite (with Young Bucks) in Korakuen truly changed my entire career and lifestyle.

Tetsuya Naito had already undergone a radical shift in 2015, but Nakamura's departure would truly set his star in motion. In spring, during an excursion to CMLL, Naito would align himself with Los Ingobernables, an amoral clique with an anti-establishment edge that always appeals in a wrestling context. On his return, Naito would take the Los Ingobernables idea and adapt it for Japanese audiences. He'd start appearing lackadaisical, entering late, in a suit for big matches, or just a T-shirt and baseball cap for tags his character didn't see as important. Naito's new character was one who could perform at the absolute peak when given the right motivation, but who didn't care about being put through the motions, and wasn't ashamed to speak his mind when doing so. He would turn in an impressive string of performances in the G1 in August, but heading to Mexico in November, he excused himself from the Power Struggle tour by claiming his 'ear lobe hurt'.[186]

Naito would go from being a Los Ingobernables representative to the leader of Los Ingobernables de Japon, in a shift that mirrored Masahiro Chono's transition to leading nWo Japan. Joining him would be a pair of prospects who shared a connection to Animal Hamaguchi's gym where Naito had spent his formative years. Takaaki Watanabe would return from ROH excursion as the gothic brawler EVIL, while BUSHI shifted from athletic but generic babyface to a mist spewing canny antagonist.

It would be Katsuyori Shibata who first stepped up to defend New Japan honour from Naito's disrespectful nature. Hirooki Goto would join the fight against the growing LIJ, a move that would earn Naito's derision. Before his shift in character, Naito and Goto's careers had paralleled one another, both highly competent wrestlers with little hook or motivation for the fans to latch onto, and who were unable to reach the main event mix as a result. Naito would bemoan the fact that 'Goto's only coming after us because Shibata did,' and that 'there's nothing of his own, nothing that motivates him,'[187]taunting Goto with a Captain New Japan like mask and saying he'd be more interesting if he became 'Captain Kuwana' after his home town in Mie prefecture.

Goto would prove victorious over Naito, fighting off LIJ interference

and delivering a Shoten Kai for a win that granted him an IWGP title challenge the next month. There was little question as to who the star of the match was, however, and the charismatic Naito would have a career defining year.

Goto's friend Katsuyori Shibata would also find himself elevated, if indirectly, by the talent departures. After three and a half years working exclusively for NJPW, but only as a freelancer, Shibata signed a full time contract with the company in March, stating that 'there's already been too many goodbyes this year'. While putting in excellent performances, and making his peace with the roster and fans, Shibata was nevertheless kept at arm's length somewhat by a company hesitant to really elevate him to main event status. Now locked in and committed, plans seemed to be put in motion to finally give Shibata the status once seemed promised to him as a 'new musketeer'.

This would start with a NEVER Openweight title reign that saw Shibata work more extensively and with more versatility than ever before. Shibata would go on to face a great depth of opponents, from LIJ muscle EVIL at home to former UFC fighter Matt Riddle abroad. It began though, with an old rival in Tomohiro Ishii.

Shibata's G1 matches with Ishii had entered into the realm of legend; brief, intense and brutally violent clashes that made viewers instant fans of both. Ishii had spent an impressive 2015 of his own with the NEVER title, finally giving the belt an identity as a tough man title with a hard hitting style in championship matches. The run had taken its toll on Ishii, who was looking increasingly like the children's character *Mr.Bump,* a new bandage or piece of tape being added to his body each month.

This bout added to the lumps and bumps on Ishii. Each man would egg on the other, sitting and daring one another to deliver powerful kicks to the spine. Shibata would bait Ishii with the chop and punch combo made famous by Ishii's mentor Genichiro Tenryu, but Tenryu would lean into the blows. After the match degenerated into rapid fire lariats and German suplexes, Ishii went out of his comfort zone with a huge top rope dropkick, but Shibata would remain with his game plan, hitting a penalty kick to emerge victorious.

While Shibata, Naito and Omega would soon enjoy an ascent, Kazuchika Okada and Hiroshi Tanahashi were already at the top. While traditional western narratives are in three acts, Japanese narrative structure is normally in four; *ki* (introduction, a big

happening as in Okada's challenge to Tanahashi in 2012), *sho* (development, the establishment of Tanahashi's love over Okada's money and the Rainmaker's journey to overcome the Ace's superiority), *ten* (the twist, or a humbled Okada who should by rights have made WK9 complete his ascent to the very top of the business being denied again by Tanahashi) and *ketsu.* Four years removed from Okada's reintroduction, their rivalry was in its fourth and final act.

While Okada was IWGP champion going into WK10, he was really positioned as challenging Tanhashi. Okada was already the man, but he had to beat the Ace to become The Man. This was evident from the outset; Tanahashi would slap Okada and try to lure him into the strike exchange trope, but Okada fired in multiple forearms, proving he wasn't interested in mind games.

Tanahashi had received scattered boos leading up to WK 10, and accepted somewhat of an antagonistic role opposite Okada. With the ending to their WK9 encounter in mind, he would assault the knees of Okada to eliminate the height difference and the champion's speed. A dragon screw over the turnbuckles would precede a Slingblade on the apron and High Fly Flow to the outside; back in and Tanahashi would lock in a punishing Texas Cloverleaf. Tanahashi often used the hold, but there was an added layer to its use this time; in evoking the Boston Crab finish used by Young Lions, he was punishing Okada's limbs while sending a message of who would always have seniority and superiority.

Yet for as much as Tanahashi was the smarter wrestler in the match, this time Okada had an undeniable tenacity. It showed when despite his hurting knees he fired off shotgun like dropkicks, including off the top rope, to send the challenger reeling. It showed when Tanahashi countered a Tombstone with his Twist and Shout flipping neckbreaker, but Okada retained his grip, stood again and landed the original move. Finally, it showed when Tanahashi landed a huge slap to Okada as he attempted the Rainmaker, but the champion retained a firm grip on the wrist before landing three successive Rainmakers and scoring the pin. As Shinpei Nogami called, Okada 'refused to let go, of the wrist, of the title, of his era'.

While Tanahashi would always be called the Ace, it was clear Okada now operated that position in practice. The question was, to what effect. Naito, Omega and Shibata were on the way up. At the end of January, Kota Ibushi, who had been out of action with a shoulder injury, held a press conference stating he was withdrawing from both

DDT and New Japan, stating that he felt ‘absolutely, mentally and physically burned out’.

Kota Ibushi
All through 2015, before the injury, I was feeling fine during my matches, but that was the only time I was happy. Contracted to both places 2015 was when the relationship between New Japan and DDT started to sour, so that put a strain on me mentally. Then my body followed suit.

He, with Nakamura and Styles were on the way out. The upward trajectory New Japan had been enjoying could continue, or it could easily fizzle out.

2017

New Japan Pro Wrestling
NJPW Wrestle Kingdom 11
January 4, 2017
Attendance: 26,192

New Japan Rumble
Michael Elgin def. Billy Gunn, Bone Soldier, Cheeseburger, Hiro Saito, Hiroyoshi Tenzan, Jushin Thunder Liger, Kuniaki Kobayashi, Manabu Nakanishi, Ryusuke Taguchi, Scott Norton, Tiger Mask, Yoshitatsu & Yuji Nagata

Tiger Mask W def. Tiger the Dark

IWGP Junior Heavyweight Tag Team Championships
Roppongi Vice (Rocky Romero & Beretta) def. Young Bucks (Matt Jackson & Nick Jackson)

NEVER Openweight SIx Man Tag Team Championships
Gauntlet Match
Bullet Club (Bad Luck Fale, Hangman Page & Yujiro Takahashi) def. CHAOS (Jado, Gedo & Will Ospreay)
Los Ingobernables De Japon (BUSHI, EVIL & SANADA) def. Bullet Club
Los Ingobernables De Japon def. David Finlay, Ricochet & Satoshi Kojima

Cody def. Juice Robinson

ROH World Championship
Adam Cole def. Kyle O'Reilly

IWGP Tag Team Championships

CHAOS (Toru Yano & Tomohiro Ishii) def. Guerillas of Destiny (Tama Tonga & Tanga Loa) & Great Bash Heel (Tomoaki Honma & Togi Makabe)

IWGP Junior Heavyweight Championship
Hiromu Takahashi def. KUSHIDA

NEVER Openweight Championship
Hirooki Goto def. Katsuyori Shibata

IWGP Intercontinental Championship
Tetsuya Naito def. Hiroshi Tanahashi

IWGP Heavyweight Championship
Kazuchika Okada def. Kenny Omega

January 5 2016 seemed so long ago. A day of doubt turned to action, departures from the roster revealed hidden growth, and New Japan had an impressive year. By the summer of 2016, four years removed from Bushiroad's purchase of the company, sales were in the 3 billion Yen margin, business having tripled since New Japan was taken over. In February, Yo Tezuka was substituted out of the NJPW presidency for Katsuhiko Harada. Tezuka's mission having been to right the ship at New Japan and return the company to significant profitability, he left having 'accomplished his mission,' allowing Harada to take things to a 'new stage'.[188] That next stage would focus on making New Japan viable for public flotation in 2020, as well as growing the Tokyo Dome audience to 40,000 by that point.[189] [190]For now, a 26,192 attendance was buoyed by steadily increasing ticket prices. Bushiroad continued to increase the New Japan audience through allegiances with major talent agency Amuse allowing for greater visibility and publicity appearances on television and in events, but in the meantime, the company was canny in extracting more money from the fans that were there.

In 2017, those in attendance (and, indeed, watching on NJPW World) were more diverse than ever before. The international contingent was drawn to the presence of Kenny Omega in the main event, but also to a more open New Japan product that had felt like a walled garden for so long. English announcing was available on World and AXS TV, and content was increasingly being localized and subtitled. Meanwhile, foreign talent made up 42 percent of the card, which was a stark

contrast to twenty years earlier and the peak of the last New Japan business boom. Then, 98.1 percent of talent under the Dome was Japanese, with the foreign presence in the New Japan ring now at the highest level for a major promotion since SWS in 1992.

The difference to the SWS era, and indeed any other point in Japanese pro wrestling history, was a philosophical one. Every other international partnership in modern history had been one that did nothing for New Japan outside of their home turf. WWF sought to find a Japanese foothold through SWS; WCW had an air of international legitimacy in their ventures with New Japan, and a talent pool to draw on when they went back home. Now was an era of international expansion. NJPW sought to tour regularly on their own right in America and elsewhere, their plans for launching an entirely localized product outside of their home region unprecedented. The international talent on Wrestle Kingdom 11 that really caught eyes all over the world weren't guests, but NJPW's own.

While Ring of Honor held a presence on the card, it was Bullet Club membership that brought relevance to Adam Cole and WWE departee Cody (*nee* Runnels/Rhodes) and not their primary American employers. Even so Cole and Cody had a tough time in front of the more casual Dome audience, despite Cole having a strong effort with New Japan semi regular Kyle O'Reilly (Cole and O'Reilly both were on their way out to WWE). In Cody's case, the audience was far more interested in the upcoming Juice Robinson, a man who had left WWE's developmental system to start again in the New Japan dojo, and was accepted by fans as one of their own as a result.

Michael Elgin was similarly embraced by the New Japan audience a year and a half prior, and was at this point a near full time wrestler for the company after leaving ROH. An eye injury in the autumn sidelined him for the pre Wrestle Kingdom conversation, but his power drew fans in during the newly traditional pre show Rumble, and did so as a 'home grown' talent. In fact, arguably the biggest reaction for a foreign talent making a 'guest' appearance was for cult underdog star Cheeseburger, who managed to last until the end before being inevitably demolished with an Elgin Bomb.

Cheeseburger
I always wanted to just wrestle anywhere in Japan, so for my first couple of times in the country to be in the Tokyo Dome was just amazing. I wasn't actually booked by ROH, but New Japan directly; I was always friendly with them when they came to the

US and it paid off. I don't think it had much to do with my wrestling ability! But I got such a big reaction I got called back.

Where once it was the rare Scott Norton and Vader like figures that really grabbed the Tokyo Dome audiences as foreign figures, at Wrestle Kingdom 11, a diverse roster grabbed fans both domestically and worldwide. Rocky Romero and Beretta had seemed on the verge of breaking up through the autumn through miscues and losses, but had pulled together to win the autumn's Super Junior Tag tournament. For the first time in years, this led to a two team matchup against the Young Bucks, and with the luxury of time and less crowding, a gripping tale was told. As Beretta was all but eliminated after a dive to the floor only caught the entrance ramp, Romero would put in an impressive solo performance. The weak link no longer, he would absorb lengthy punishment from the Bucks, before an inside cradle, and Beretta blocking an interruption, saw new champions.

Rocky Romero
The four-way tags were so hard to put together, because there were eight people to get on the same page and often things got lost. But they held up really well, they were spectacular, and in a real way, if we didn't do matches like those we wouldn't have gotten popular enough for this match to work. We had more people familiar with us, and it meant that even though I'm not a flashy wrestler by any means, I was able to get the crowd fired up against the Bucks and get the same kind of reactions as someone more spectacular. Then this match was able to set up another with the Bucks in the year where people were even more involved emotionally. So there's a plan, Gedo knows what's up. Nothing's week to week but it's built long term, and that's what makes New Japan the best product.

Domestically, a roster depth that was perhaps unseen in early 2016 was made more visible and relevant a year later. Katsuyori Shibata, Tetsuya Naito, and the new addition of (formerly Seiya) SANADA had comfortably filled gaps in the top and mid spots on the card. There was such a wealth of options in fact that setbacks to WK11 were comfortably brushed off. The relationship between NJPW and Pro Wrestling NOAH came to a head in the summer as NOAH participation in the G1 seemed sure to spin off into major matches in the Tokyo Dome for Naomichi Marufuji, Go Shiozaki and Katsuhiko Nakajima. Bushiroad had been interested in expanding their support for NOAH into full ownership, but when the company needed a new sponsor at short order, Marufuji negotiated a sale to IT company

Estbee[191] without Bushiroad's knowledge[192]. This would see New Japan withdraw loaned talents Suzuki Gun and Jado, and kill any cross promotional programs.

Not that one would notice by watching WK 11 in a vacuum. There was, if anything, an abundance of talent at WK11, such that Kota Ibushi, now operating as a freelancer, was able to return without his established name and character. Bushiroad's anime group had reimagined the classic *Tiger Mask* anime as *Tiger Mask W,* and Ibushi would fill the role of the eponymous masked wrestler, facing American high flier ACH as nemesis Tiger the Dark. A brief display of high flying ability was made interesting by both nodding to their regular personae, Tiger the Dark teasing an ACH taunt, and Tiger Mask W landing the unmistakable Ibushi triangle quebrada.

Kota Ibushi
Really the way I approached Tiger Mask W was different to how Kenta Kobashi did, or Mitsuharu Misawa did. I didn't try to embody the character so much as have it be an extension of myself. My point of reference wasn't those guys so much as Keiji Muto as the Great Muta; you know it's the same person but they move differently and have different personalities.

In hindsight, I wish I could have been on that show as myself. I don't really have a lot of fond memories of Tiger Mask W, or my time in WWE just before. I don't remember much of it honestly! But I had to prove myself coming back and that led to being myself in the G1.

Katsuyori Shibata would likely have been at the center of the New Japan versus NOAH feud as autumn turned to winter. Instead, he found himself with Hirooki Goto, the two friends having their fortunes intertwined in the Dome. Goto had unsuccessfully challenged Kazuchika Okada for the IWGP title early in 2016, and shortly afterward joined the champion in CHAOS as impetus for his 'revival'. Shibata though was tired of Goto's repeated 'resurgences', questioning why he would become a 'stooge' for Okada and asking 'when were you at your best that now you need a revival?'[193]

By now, Shibata, after a year with the NEVER title, was working as hurt and was as taped up as Ishii a year earlier. Still, the champion dominated Goto early before his friend finally fired up. Eventually, Goto would hit his new finish, the GTR, twice to win. It would seem in 2017 that Goto would finally find his place as NEVER champion with

hard fought midcard matches rather than as a top contender. Shibata meanwhile was on his way up; a New Japan Cup tournament win would see him challenge Okada in April, but dehydration in a long match combined dangerously with a headbutt clashing skulls with the IWGP champion. Shibata would collapse post match, victim of a subdural hematoma; it seemed as if he would never wrestle again.

While Bullet Club was still the top attraction in New Japan to foreign fans, domestically, 2016 had been the year of Los Ingobernables De Japon. The group would consistently have merchandise at the top of bestselling charts, and compared to the bloated BC or CHAOS, was a tight unit of high level talents.

Hiromu Takahashi was the newest LIJ entrant, and one with a lot of hype. The youngster had one of the longest international excursions of any New Japan talent in history, taking several years in CMLL and ROH as Kamaitachi. In Mexico, Takahashi would have a phenomenal rivalry with Dragon Lee, a series that would see hype reach a fever pitch for his return. He would come back as the Time Bomb, a mentally disturbed loose cannon with a reckless in ring style.

Takahashi would establish that character immediately in ring with KUSHIDA. A sunset flip powerbomb to the floor was followed by a terrifying dive; the IWGP junior heavyweight challenger launching himself bodily at the champion out on the floor. KUSHIDA would have the more considered game plan targeting Takahashi's arm, but the wild, unpredictable offense of the challenger would result in a Death Valley Driver into the corner and his Time Bomb finish to make for a new champion.

While Takahashi was an unhinged figure, Tetsuya Naito was the far more composed LIJ leader. Naito had reached superstar status in 2016, reaching the G1 Climax final and winning Tokyo Sport's MVP award. It appeared he and LIJ could do no wrong: 'Before I used to desperately think "what can I do to draw people in", "how can I get over",' he'd recall. 'Now with LIJ, we do what we want, and people come with us. I don't worry about how the crowd will react.' *[194]*

Nothing exemplifies this attitude more than how Naito would react to winning the Intercontinental title from Michael Elgin. Declaring that the title was meaningless and something he never wanted, Naito would take to tossing the title into the ring on his entrances, leading to the belt getting progressively more damaged. Hiroshi Tanahashi would take offense to Naito's demeanour as champion, but would also

admit that Naito was his ‘last chance’ at a featured match at Wrestle Kingdom; Naito would counter that with a year plagued with injuries and high profile losses, Tanahashi was finished and that he'd surpassed his challenger.

Naito would seek to prove as much by adopting Tanahashi’s game plan of assaulting his opponent’s knee, and trying to outdo his challenger. Repeatedly as Tanahashi mounted some offense, Naito would kill his momentum by going back to the knee, despite Tanahashi doing some damage of his own with a dragon screw over the ropes and a Slingblade on the apron. When Tanahashi landed a High Fly Flow to Naito’s back, a decisive second would only see him landing on his injured knee, leading to Naito’s Destino. Bowing his head, Naito would symbolically push his fist into the fallen Tanahashi’s chest; as he'd promised beforehand, in Naito’s mind he ‘drove home the final nail in Tanahashi’s career’.*[195]*

While Naito’s fortunes had certainly changed over his ungovernable year and a half, nobody had risen quite so sharply year over year as Kenny Omega. After the post WK 10 talent exodus, and his ousting of AJ Styles as Bullet Club leader, Omega won the Intercontinental title that Shinsuke Nakamura vacated and held it until the summer. He would then enter the G1 Climax for the first time and win the tournament, becoming the first foreign wrestler to ever do so, and opening the path to becoming the first foreign Tokyo Dome main eventer since Brock Lesnar in 2006. Omega had branded himself as the man to lead New Japan into a new world of international success, and with a large foreign contingent in the Tokyo Dome, it was hard to disagree.

While Lesnar and Nakamura was a brief disappointment, Omega and Okada pulled out all the stops in a 46 minute match that felt half as long. Starting at a frenetic pace as both men tried to hit their respective finishes, the match didn't slow down for long before escalating in ferocity and danger in a way that echoed the *oudou* era of All Japan. Okada would fling Omega through a ringside table, while Omega would hit a terrifying top rope Dragon suplex to the champion. It led to a thrilling closing sequence as Okada repeatedly denied Omega’s attempts at the One Winged Angel, and even after Omega would use personalised versions of Okada’s moves, with a cradled Tombstone and a Rainmaker into a devastating knee, it wasn't enough for the Cleaner. Okada would land a corkscrew Tombstone and the Rainmaker to retain after a superhuman effort.

Steve Corino
To me, nothing topped this match. Just art. And I was lucky to be there to call it. New Japan always hits a home run with Tokyo Dome events, but it was the last match I got to call at Wrestle Kingdom and one of the best of all times.

Kenny Omega
The match against Okada really took a life of its own; I never could have anticipated what it became in the eyes of people everywhere. You really can't plan for things like that, all you can do is try your best in the moment.

Thinking back, what I do remember is wanting to take an approach similar to my G1 performance. A re-introduction from zero. Open my mind to everything available to us and tell a very human story for everyone who either hadn't seen me yet, didn't believe, or didn't want to believe.

From the entrances to the pre match interviews, all of it was carefully constructed to play into the story and spectacle of the match. People still were on the fence about me as a main eventer and if I didn't open my heart to them and properly introduce myself, I'd never get that connection. So, even though I'd beaten Tanahashi and Naito earlier in the year, I think this was the match - in a losing effort - which catapulted me as one of our top 4 in NJPW.

The match would become the hot topic of the entire wrestling world for weeks. Yet in the midst of six-star Wrestling Observer ratings and many claiming it was an unsurpassable performance were concerns over how far Okada and Omega pushed themselves physically. Discussions over safety would continue in 2017 after Shibata's hematoma, and Tomoaki Honma suffering a cervical spinal injury that left him temporarily paralyzed; in DDT in March, Yoshihiro Takayama suffered a similar injury and was still paralyzed from the neck down a year later. Yet concerns over safety also seemed to come across a generational divide. A Tanahashi who was by now entering an elder statesman role would state that the match was 'something else, but with dangerous moves it's a double-edged sword,'*[196]* while on the younger end of the spectrum, Hiromu Takahashi would respond that 'There are no moves that aren't dangerous, it's a dangerous game.'[197]

Munehiro Hashimoto
If you look at the entire scene, I think the idea of dropping

someone from the top rope, or dropping people on their heads is something that's become less common if anything. Perhaps that's down to injuries, perhaps it's general fashion. The fans don't necessarily think that dangerous offense is what makes a match. As a result, Kenny and Okada stood out as perhaps more dangerous than what we've become used to. But I'd say that it isn't the moves but the ability of wrestlers to take care of themselves and have a sensible schedule that's important.

Kenny Omega
When you speak with wrestlers like Tanahashi, they are still fans of the wrestling they loved when they were children. They search for this proper structure or match archetype that is the "right way". It's because of this that the business can't grow. No one is pushing the boundaries or creating. Everyone is wrestling like a fan, and it shows. We all have to bump a certain way, walk a certain way, chain wrestle a certain way... nothing I did in my match with Okada made me nervous or fear for my safety. People feel like if they can't do it, it must be too dangerous. No, that's not true. We're all different people and have different athletic thresholds. People like Okada and I have the ability to do incredible things without a huge risk to our safety.

It seemed like both philosophically and in terms of business, a new era was approaching. The next show in the Tokyo Dome was something with a different philosophy entirely.

Dramatic Dream Team
DDT Rojou Puroresu (Street Wrestling) in Tokyo Dome
June 1, 2017
Attendance: 0

Minoru Suzuki def. Sanshiro Takagi

Sanshiro Takagi achieved a career goal at age 47. Glass shattering in tribute to the Stone Cold Steve Austin character Takagi patterned himself after, the famous redneck's bass was replaced by the German techno of Scooter's 'Fire' blaring out across the Tokyo Dome. Takagi

stomped out onto the famous floor of the Dome for the first time, pointing to the unoccupied cheap seats. Whipping the invisible crowd into a frenzy, Takagi raised both fists in a triumphant pose on all four.. bases of the baseball field.

Continuing the bizarre pastiche, NEVER openweight champion Minoru Suzuki would stand across the pitcher's mound from him, after stepping through invisible ropes on the third base line and performing his customary kick to the face of an invisible Young Lion. This was the 566th match in the building, but unlike any that had gone before it. This was the Tokyo Dome, DDT style.

For the product DDT became under his leadership, it may be surprising that Tadashi Takagi was a big fan of the UWF as a university student. His fandom of the martial arts themed pro wrestling combined with a love of TV and cinema, as he joined clubs to train in sambo and learn TV production (Takagi would later credit DDT's innovative production techniques and use of music videos to his time producing campus TV shows[198]).

After graduating, Takagi would work on the independents for a few years, debuting in 1994 for *Kokusai Wrestling Promotion* (also known as IWA Shonan, unrelated to the deathmatch promotion IWA Japan), a group headed by Masahiko Takasugi, and a few splinters removed from the death of SWS. It didn't take long for Takagi to decide he wanted to go into business for himself though, and in 1997 he'd form DDT, with himself as the company ace.

Dramatic Dream Team took its name from the Dreamteam promotion in Makoto Kobayashi's late 70s wrestling manga *1,2 no Sanshiro!*, the protagonist of which also inspiring Takagi's ring name. Any vestiges of Takagi's Sambo styled wrestling would quickly disappear in the overcrowded combat sports market at the time. Instead, he would take inspiration from the States, and the over the top antics of Steve Austin on Monday Night Raw. DDT would double down on the 'Dramatic' part of its name and present something new to Japanese wrestling in the process.

'When we started, the word "entertainment" really wasn't something you'd hear in connection with wrestling,' Takagi would recount in 2016. 'We pioneered that, and pioneers are who stay around in wrestling. Atsushi Onita pioneered the deathmatch movement and that helped him find such long life as a wrestler. We pioneered the entertainment style, and that made us strong as a promotion.'[199]

Bushiroad achieved marketing success with New Japan by treating talent as characters with unique branding as opposed to 'mere' athletes in order to appeal to outside audiences. Fifteen years earlier, albeit on a smaller scale, DDT did the same with characters that were unique and often bizarre. Atsuo Sawada was a veteran indie talent who had worked for NJPW through the 1980s and trained with the very much orthodox Malenkos. Rechristened Poison Sawada, he would wrestle in deathmatches for IWA in the early 1990s, but his career was extended all the way to 2012 by becoming a major part of Takagi's promotion. Poison Sawada JULIE was a parody of cartoonish gimmicks in 1990s WWF, a mystical creature with command of potions and magic that would allow him to control opponents' minds.

Akiru Miyashita was a university soccer player and won several bodybuilding contests. In DDT though, he became Danshoku Dino, a wildly over the top and aggressively sexual gay character. In part a play on the extravagant *exoticos* of Mexican wrestling culture, Dino veered between broad and offensive stereotype and an inspirational character. He'd grab male members of the audience and kiss them, and have moves like the 'Cock Bottom', or 'nightmare', where he would strip to a thong and squat over his opponent's face, 'teabagging' them. This was balanced with a positive message about believing in and expressing oneself regardless of orientation or style.

Characters didn't even have to be human, or indeed alive; Yoshihiko was a major star in the promotion despite the handicap of being an inflatable sex doll. The Iron Heavymetalweight Championship, a belt patterned after the WWF's short lived Hardcore title (which was in theory defended 24 hours a day, seven days a week) was at various times won by children, taxi drivers, puppies, and fried chicken skewers.

Yet comedy wasn't the only string to DDT's bow. Comedy wrestling was nothing especially new as a concept for matches or promotions, after all. DDT contrasted its zanier characters with legitimately impressive wrestlers who were, all the same, able to go back and forth between serious action and crazier storylines. Kota Ibushi was inspired by DDT's alternate presentation to enter their system and quickly become a star. The eternally youthful looking HARASHIMA went to college with Togi Makabe and shared a hard-hitting philosophy, albeit with a much faster and more athletic style. Kenny Omega would get his Japanese break in DDT, while shortly before appearing in WWE as Sami Zayn, El Generico had a spell in the company with some

impressive bouts against Ibushi. For Takagi, it wouldn't do to have a company that solely served his vision of what the medium should be. With a philosophy that 'Pro wrestling is a creative work,'[200] foremost, onus was placed on his workers to aid in that creation.

Kenny Omega
Mostly everyone in DDT is given a certain freedom once they can prove their creativity is something that can generate a positive response. Most of my best material has been produced in a DDT ring because they gave me the platform and carte blanche to do it.

DDT became perhaps a more successfully implemented version of Keiji Muto's 'package pro wrestling' vision for All Japan in the early 2000s. This was, as Giant Baba once said 'bright, fun, tough' pro wrestling, but pro wrestling that also toyed with the conventions of presenting the medium in Japan. DDT also outlived the entertainment aspirations of Wrestle-1 and HUSTLE; Takagi was canny in never outreaching his promotion's grasp and cultivated a strong core audience that grew slowly and steadily. His aspirations were extremely large, but he'd only make real steps to act on them when he felt the company was ready.

DDT running the famous Budokan in 2012 was just one such aspiration, and it was a modest success, with a strong announced crowd of 10,192 on hand to witness a phenomenal main event between Omega and Ibushi. Also heavily promoted on the show, which celebrated DDT's 15th anniversary, was Minoru Suzuki defeating Takagi in a weapon filled match. A beaten Takagi would vow to face Suzuki again one on one, but not for five years; this time to mark the 20th anniversary of the promotion, and this time in the Tokyo Dome.
The idea was laughed off by the live crowd; however positive business may have been, DDT making it to 20 years old was a significant ask, let alone the idea of it having the capital and fanbase to run in the Dome. In practice of course, DDT couldn't hope to put a significant paying audience in the Tokyo Dome; *Rojou* was a different matter.

One of the elements of DDT's product that separated it from other promotions, and often made its output viral as social media became a major factor in promotion, was its refusal to be attached to the traditional setting of a wrestling ring in an arena. Campsites, factories, theme parks, music festivals, all would play host to DDT matches.

Kota Ibushi
For me, what's attractive about it is the idea of showing pro wrestling to somebody that's never seen it before. There are people who have never heard of pro wrestling, never seen it, but if I can show one of those people what I do, they can think 'this pro wrestling is cool!' and become a fan. It grows what pro wrestling is.

Rojou (literally Street) wrestling became a sub brand of sorts for Takagi, who took simple wrestling in strange environments and morphed those matches into movies with ludicrous storylines. Ibushi might have to evict tenants from a run-down apartment building, while Danshoku Dieno would end 2017 moving through an office complex with the goal of kissing the company president. More than performing for a live crowd alone, this was filmmaking in one take with frequent audience participation and liberal treatment of the fourth wall. This was the environment Takagi and Suzuki stepped into at the start of June, 2017.

The film being made here was full of cameo appearances and had a cast far larger than the match lineup would suggest. Aja Kong would start proceedings off, singing the Japanese national anthem *kimigayo* while becoming increasingly frustrated with the jaw jacking between Takagi and Suzuki behind her.

The opening moments of the match were as technical as proceedings were ever going to get; even then an exchange of submission holds existed purely for the gag of having Suzuki and then Takagi touch third base in order to force a 'rope break' from the referee. The rest of the bout consisted of a 50 minute long walking brawl through every inch of the Tokyo Dome, the match serving as a backdrop for the bizarre incidents the two came across on the way.

Gota Ihashi would attempt to interfere on Takagi's behalf to zero effect, and got kicked down three flights of stairs for his efforts. The penny pinching Ken Oka begged Dome officials to let him book his small spinoff promotion, Ganbare Pro in the Tokyo Dome for 50,000 Yen (500 US Dollars). His part ended when he bumped into hardcore veteran Jun Kasai (who was working as a janitor), and was splashed through a table.

The Shinsuke Nakamura and Hiroshi Tanahashi rivalry was revived in the Tokyo Dome, but only in cosplay form, as imitators Chinsuke Nakamura and Hiroshi Tanabota brawled in the corridor. Both were

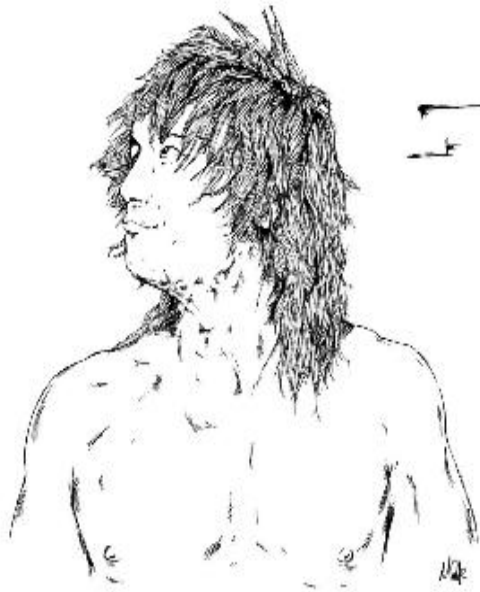
dispatched quickly by Takagi, with Tanabota taking heavy shots (a knowing nod to Tanahashi's appearance in DDT a couple of years earlier, after which he was critical of the promotion and HARASHIMA). This after the legendary Genichiro Tenryu, now retired, made his cameo coaching DDT's younger stars Keisuke Ishii and Ryota Nakatsu in the art of.. baseball.

Ultimately, after Suzuki and Takagi both played ball themselves, with *joshi* veteran Meiko Satomura pitching, Suzuki struck Takagi with a Gotch piledriver on home plate. An emotional Takagi vowed to retire, but his claim was disingenuous, as he hit Suzuki with a stunner and said their next meeting would be on a deserted island, the one way to top the largest empty arena match in wrestling history.

Yet Takagi wasn't satisfied with an empty Tokyo Dome. Months after the Suzuki match, Takagi revealed some big plans before he turned 50 in 2020. 'I want to run the Tokyo Dome in three years, in time for the Olympic year, 2020. So that's what I'm building a business plan toward right now,'[201]

A tall order? Perhaps, yet DDT ended 2017 in strong shape for such an ambitious venture to happen. Purchased by Japanese media giant Cyber Agent in the autumn, they, like NJPW found themselves part of a larger media company that was committed to growing them without meddling with the in (or in this case, out of) ring product. They would receive a huge media platform in the shape of Cyber Agent's large and rapidly growing Abema TV streaming platform and seemed poised to make major waves as the end of the decade loomed. At the same time, it was telling that nearly three decades after the Tokyo Dome's construction, it was still viewed as the de facto mark of prestige and ultimate success in the Japanese wrestling business to run there.

2018



New Japan Pro Wrestling
NJPW Wrestle Kingdom 12
January 4, 2018
Attendance: 34,995

New Japan Rumble
Masahito Kakihara def. Gino Gambino, BUSHI, Chase Owens, Cheeseburger, David Finlay, Delirious, El Desperado, Hiroyoshi Tenzan, Jushin Thunder Liger, Katsuya Kitamura, Leo Tonga, Manabu Nakanishi, Satoshi Kojima, TAKA Michinoku, Tiger Mask, Toa Henare, YOSHI-HASHI, Yoshinobu Kanemaru, Yuji Nagata & Yujiro Takahashi

IWGP Junior Tag Team Championships
Young Bucks (Matt Jackson & Nick Jackson) def. Roppongi 3K (SHO & YOH)

NEVER Openweight Six Man Tag Team Championships
Gauntlet Match
Suzuki-Gun (Zack Sabre Junior, Takashi Iizuka & Taichi) def. War Machine (Raymond Rowe & Hanson) & Michael Elgin
CHAOS (Toru Yano, Beretta & Tomohiro Ishii) def. Suzuki-Gun
CHAOS def. Taguchi Japan (Ryusuke Taguchi, Togi Makabe & Juice Robinson)
CHAOS def. Bullet Club (Bad Luck Fale, Tama Tonga & Tanga Loa)

Kota Ibushi def. Cody

IWGP Tag Team Championships
Los Ingobernables De Japon (EVIL & SANADA) def. Killer Elite Squad (Lance Archer & Davey Boy Smith Junior)

NEVER Openweight Championship
Hair versus Hair, No Seconds
Hirooki Goto def. Minoru Suzuki

IWGP Junior Heavyweight Championship
Will Ospreay def. Marty Scurll, Hiromu Takahashi & KUSHIDA

IWGP Intercontinental Championship
Hiroshi Tanahashi def. Jay White

IWGP United States Championship
Kenny Omega def. Chris Jericho

IWGP Heavyweight Championship
Kazuchika Okada def. Tetsuya Naito

‘Double main event’ is a broadly meaningless term. It's normally used to make a hard late promotional push for one match, while a different one has the top billing on a show. The opposite can also be true; it

may be acknowledgement that for reasons of tradition, or a sudden surge in interest, that the biggest match of the show is one that takes place earlier in the evening. It's a message that soothes egos and softens damage of uninspiring top matches, and one that has been used, even in Japan, for decades. In 1955, when Rikidozan was paired with former Italian boxer Primo Carnera in Kuramae Sumo Hall, trepidation from fans over Carnera's inexperience leading to poor matches was softened by having a 'double main' with Kokichi Endo and Kinnichi Azumafuji tag teaming underneath.

Tetsuya Naito had been through this once before; the fan vote loss of 2014 after his supposedly triumphant return from injury to G1 glory still stung. Now he was going on last, and riding momentum he would have thought unimaginable four years prior. The Los Ingobernables mania was strong as ever, and when Naito beat Kenny Omega to win the G1 Climax for the second time, Ryogoku chanted Naito's catchphrases until throats were raw.

When Naito found his IWGP championship clash with Kazuchika Okada would share double main event billing with another match, he would call out the promoter's euphemism hidden in the term. 'It's meaningless. You can call that match "double main event one" all you like to make you feel good, but that doesn't mean anything. It's the semi main event.'[202]

Yet this show was different. In the rarest of circumstances, it felt like Wrestle Kingdom 12 was a true double main event, with a different match being the center of attention for clearly demarked demographics. Naito and Okada was the biggest deal for the hardcore and Japanese fans, but it was a different story for a lot of foreign fans tuning in or showing up live for the first time.

Kenny Omega seemed destined to meet Kota Ibushi to start his 2018. The two had been kept apart for years, but Omega and Ibushi both would keep their past history alive in media interviews and hint at the possibility of an in ring confrontation. Yet Omega wasn't convinced the time was right in terms of interest for him and Ibushi, remarking 'it would have been a great match, but that's all it would have been.'[203]

Kota Ibushi
I ended up wrestling Cody, which was a match that turned out well, I think. A lot of people told me that it reminded them of Genichiro Tenryu and Randy Savage; I think there was a good

theme to things starting out very American style, and ending as a real Kota Ibushi match.

As for Kenny, if New Japan aims to sell out the Tokyo Dome in 2020 I can't think of a better main event for the IWGP title than Kenny Omega versus Kota Ibushi. At this point, if we're going to do it, it has to be in the Dome. But maybe 2020 is a little too late for the timing to be right.

Instead, NJPW English colour announcer Don Callis became an intermediary between Omega and Chris Jericho, who had recently become a freelancer and was open to outside appearances after 18 years exclusively with WWE. While Jericho undeniably had his fans in Japan, there was no disputing what audience 'Alpha versus Omega' would be directed at. Japanese promotion was often as much about establishing Jericho's Japanese credentials to the uninitiated as it was about the dream match status of two of the world's best, both from Winnipeg, Ontario, Canada, meeting.[204]

The build to the match was remarkably American in nature. Despite being between two Canadians, this was, after all, a match for the IWGP United States title, yet another championship in the New Japan gamut that was the centerpiece of NJPW's steady advance into the American market. The traditional Japanese route of months of preliminary tag match skirmishes would be eschewed with limited appearances available for Jericho. A pair of pre-recorded videos and wild brawls in ring in Fukuoka and a press conference the next day was enough to establish a blood feud with Omega; achieving a lot with very little time, the table was set for a no disqualification match. The stipulation in itself was circumstance convening to make something that was beneficial for all parties; while Omega and Jericho both stated that they felt no need to mask Jericho's advanced 47 years and had every intent to have a physical and demanding match[205], the ability to brawl with weapons was there as a shortcut if one were needed.

Kenny Omega

The whole match really came together at the 11th hour. I don't know when the exact date was, but as soon as the paperwork was done there was already filming being planned for the surprise challenge, and then it dropped in Osaka.

I'm always conscious of the worldwide appeal to every match; it's why my style translates so well internationally and domestically. I never doubted myself or Jericho to put in a performance

everyone could enjoy; Naito put in a lot of shit talking about the 'double main event' thing, and I never wanted to respond with anything but my performance.

Shortcuts were neither needed nor taken in the match itself, which was spectacular as it was violent, and which surpassed even ardent fans' expectations. Omega would take the brunt of the punishment in the match, diving to the outside early and wiping out both Callis and the English announce table, before using the light rigging as a platform to stomp a table onto Jericho.

For his part though, Jericho took more than his fair share of the lumps given his veteran status. A table brought out early in the match would, like Chekov's gun, obviously come into play later on, with a big tumble for the US challenger. After Omega had washed the blood from his eyes after some rare chair shots to the head from Jericho (protected somewhat by chairs that fell apart rather easily) meanwhile, a One Winged Angel onto a steel chair would secure victory for the US champion. Omega had bettered the self-proclaimed best in the world, and together with Jericho had drawn thousands of new eyes to the New Japan product, as NJPW World subscribers grew past 90,000 with the majority of newcomers coming from outside Japan.

Jericho had a celebrity status and a superstar aura that pulled even the unfamiliar New Japan audience along. New Zealander Jay White had a tougher task. Having relocated himself to the U.K. to start his career, White was noticed by Prince Devitt, who recommended him for the New Japan Dojo. After an American excursion, White would receive a similar treatment to Hiromu Takahashi a year prior, a series of vignettes starting at the G1 Climax final reintroducing himself as the sociopathic Switchblade.

By challenging Intercontinental champion Hiroshi Tanahashi, White was put into a high pressure and challenging debut. 'He's in a tougher position than Okada was,' Tanahashi would comment before the match. 'Okada had the reintroduction, had his Tokyo Dome match and then challenged me at the end of the show (in 2012). Jay is straight into the title match. He's being put in a higher profile situation than anyone else.'[206]

Jay White
I did find it difficult to show who I was just within that match. Sure, I was there as a young boy before, but it's completely

different to come back as someone else, as I was no longer just filling the role of a young lion trying to show that he has heart.

I can see why (Tanahashi) said what he did and I agree. Even putting Okada's introduction match aside, it was always going to be tougher as a foreigner. Debuting in that position with one of the top guys in a top position of the biggest show of the year, I don't know if that's been done before. But I like the pressure, I thrive off it. That they believe in me, I've gone from telling myself 'prove them wrong' before every match to saying 'prove them right'.

Tanahashi suffered from nagging knee injuries through December, which would become the story of the match. As Tanahashi responded with his own dragon screws and leg-based offense, the match felt similar to Tanahashi's challenge of Tetsuya Naito a year earlier, the difference being White's youthful exuberance not being able to surpass the Ace's experience. A telling moment in the match was White climbing to the top rope and as Tanahashi slowly rolled away, descending once more with no offense attempted; when White tried again, Tanahashi swatted away the attempted dropkick and assaulted his challenger's knee. Whether the bizarre moment was born out of White's inexperience, or the canny veteran reading a brash youngster's inexperience, it proved the turning point of a match won with a pair of High Fly Flows.

White was part of the same Dojo class as Sho Tanaka and Yohei Komatsu, who had returned from their own excursions in the autumn. Coached by Rocky Romero, they were rebranded as SHO and YOH, Roppongi 3K, powerhouse junior heavyweights who played party animal like characters. With a violent streak to complement their pop star good looks, RPG 3K evoked tag teams like MaruKEN from the early NOAH days, and quickly claimed IWGP junior heavyweight gold.

The youthful tag team on a hot streak would put the Young Bucks in the unfamiliar position of veteran gatekeepers in a tremendous show opener. Isolating Komatsu's back, the Bucks were more considered and cruel than most fans were accustomed to, while SHO was showcased with some spectacular offense, his propensity for the German suplex leading to him dumping both Bucks at once. SHO and YOH would counter More Bang For Your Buck in a replay of the previous year's victory for coach Romero and Beretta, but this time it was to no avail as the Bucks followed a Meltzer Driver with a Sharpshooter submission on YOH.

The junior division at large was a crowded space, but with quality at a high. KUSHIDA, Hiromu Takahashi and relative newcomers in Englishmen Will Ospreay and Marty Scurll had all held the IWGP junior heavyweight title at some point during 2017, with Ospreay at the centre of the four-way dispute. Having become the first British Best of the Super Juniors winner in 2016, Ospreay still wouldn't be able to beat Japanese nemesis KUSHIDA until the next autumn. Finally having vanquished his Japanese foe in October 2017, he would be deposed by his British nemesis in Scurll the next month. Meanwhile Takahashi had veered wildly from demented psychopath to eccentric comedian through the year and was searching for a way back into the championship chase.

The ensuing four way, a first for any singles title in New Japan, was spectacular and compelling. KUSHIDA and Scurll would be painted as the technical bases for Takahashi and Ospreay's high flying, and while KUSHIDA would catch a soaring Ospreay into arm bars, Scurll would opt for shortcuts, using medical tape to tie Takahashi up outside. The Time Bomb would free himself though, for one of the biggest reactions in the match; still it was Ospreay who shone the brightest. A huge moonsault off a lighting rig started a night that ended with catching Scurll with his Oscutter finish and finally pinning Cambridge's 'Villain'.

Will Ospreay
Putting together a four-way match in that environment was tough but after hearing the feedback from the crowd it was really rewarding. That it was so refreshing, such a change of pace, captured people's imaginations. I think it was the perfect match for the Tokyo Dome; we just had to show they picked the right guys to go above and beyond for them. That's the motivation I needed to make me jump off that massive lighting rig like a madman.

By appearing in the pre-show rumble (won by UWFi veteran and cancer survivor Masahito Kakihara, who used his moment in the spotlight to send support for the stricken Yoshihiro Takayama), Jushin Thunder Liger maintained his streak of being the only participant in the Tokyo Dome's first wrestling show and its most recent at Wrestle Kingdom 12. In terms of high profile main card appearances though, the biggest gap from Tokyo Dome debut to most recent appearance went to Minoru Suzuki. Having returned to New Japan from NOAH just after the prior year's WK 11, Suzuki couldn't wrest the IWGP title

from Okada that February, but he did take NEVER gold. Poetically enough, at WK12, he defended against Hirooki Goto fifth from the top on the card; the exact same spot he found himself in opposite Maurice Smith his first time in the building on November 29, 1989.

Suzuki would lose the NEVER title to Goto in what was by now a Wrestle Kingdom tradition; the hard fought Goto NEVER title match where lumps are freely exchanged. Here Suzuki would run rampant on Goto in the early going, climbing up to the second rope and choking his challenger to the point Goto seemed legitimately unconscious, eyes rolling back into his head and all. Suzuki's surgical dissection of Goto was paired with some remarkable speed and athleticism from the man turning 50 later in the year; his dropkick to Goto's jaw would rival that of the IWGP champion. Still, an Ushigoroshi from the top rope would lead to a pair of GTRs and a Goto victory.

With nothing for Goto to bargain against Suzuki's NEVER title, the challenger had volunteered to shave his head if he lost. A hair versus hair stipulation was Suzuki's suggestion however, and when he lost, Suzuki, carried away by his Suzuki Gun teammates, would return to the ring under his own power, shaving off his own hair. The Tokyo Dome was unified in its respect for the prideful former champion, though it only took one night and an assault on Tanahashi in Korakuen to get the boos to rain on him again.

Boos had started to come to Okada over the course of 2017, though less for cowardly attacks and more for sheer dominance. Okada would profess not to care about the statistics of his IWGP title run, which had comfortably outstripped Shinya Hashimoto's 1994-1995 reign to be the longest in history. Yet by making 'I'm sorry, I'm far too good!' part of his show closing spiel, Okada's cockiness in spite of his phenomenal performances would make many want someone to depose him, and Naito was the perfect man of the people to take him on.

Naito and Okada's story had accelerated in the wake of the talent exodus of early 2016. Takaaki Kidani would sign the Rainmaker to a multiple year contract, at the same time announcing a 200 million Yen project that would throw Bushiroad marketing resources behind making Kazuchika Okada a household name.[207] When the plans for Okada were made public, Naito was instantly able to carve himself an antiestablishment niche, which would only grow deeper and more faithful. In a period where New Japan was attempting to appeal more and more to the foreign audience meanwhile, Naito would pledge to sell out arenas and run in bigger buildings within Japan, representing

the diehard fans who were wary of changes as the NJPW product localised itself to new audiences.

Naito redeemed his fan vote defeat of 2013 to finally stand in the main event of a Tokyo Dome show. He had never been more popular, and never more beloved by the Tokyo Dome crowd. The only thing he was lacking was the IWGP title, but his waist would remain light at the end of the evening.

Naito seemed carefree for the entirety of the half hour with Okada. Having wrestled with a chip on his shoulder since joining Los Ingobernables, Naito was suddenly a man truly happy to be in his position. After crediting his success to not caring what the people thought of him, Naito was obsessed with the idea of fans chanting '*De! Ja! Pon!'* after his crowning glory. While El Ingobernable had proven himself able to beat Okada, the man in the ring was the Stardust Genius once more.

While Naito would target Okada's neck to some success in the early going, with painful looking neckbreakers, including over the guardrail, Naito would seem lost in the moment, which would be his undoing. Twice he would gesture to the corner and attempt the Stardust Press largely retired since his change in character, only for Okada to evade. For the champion's part meanwhile, despite gaudy new ring gear that replaced his usual shorts with long trousers, he seemed entirely focused.

There was much of 2014 Okada vs Tanahashi in 2018 Naito vs Okada. Chiefly, this was a match where the popular challenger lacked the killer instinct of the established champion. When Tanahashi destroyed Okada's legs to prevent him standing for a High Fly Flow, it would change the Rainmaker from cocky and preening to someone hardened, someone who resolutely refused to let go of his opponent's wrist in order to hit a Rainmaker and retain his hold on the IWGP title. With Okada as the face of the promotion, a telling exchange was when a huge German suplex was delivered to Naito. Naito would reach out to the turnbuckle in a bid to avoid being pitched over the champion's head; but Okada was too strong. Naito would let go when the champion never would.

With the match in his grasp, Naito hit a running Destino to Okada, and rather than complete the job, would gesture again to the corner, determined to win with a Stardust Press. The obsession cost him; Okada would hit a twisting Tombstone and a decisive Rainmaker.

The challenger, seemingly at peak popularity, and the overwhelming favourite to win was denied in what appeared to be a mirror image of Okada and Tanahashi at Wrestle Kingdom 9. Yet unlike Okada's tears, Naito would walk out with a wry grin. To Naito, he'd achieved something greater than the IWGP title, and he knew that his story wasn't over.

Behind the scenes, the little smile may well have come from Naito knowing his title chase had been a huge business success. 34,995 tickets had been sold for the most successful Tokyo Dome show in years; while the figure was way south of the 50 and 60,000 numbers claimed in the past, this was a legitimate number thanks to a late 2015 Bushiroad policy of announcing the legitimate number of tickets sold instead of an inflated 'sponsor number'[208]. Naito's story wasn't over. Neither was New Japan's, nor that of pro wrestling in the Big Egg.

Afterword

34,995 people were in attendance for Wrestle Kingdom 12. It would become the biggest live crowd for a pro wrestling event in Japan in 2018, and one of the largest in the world that year. It was a triumph for the once beleaguered New Japan, and a triumph for the once beleaguered medium of pro wrestling at large. Yet it wasn't a stopping point. Kazuchika Okada would address the crowd after the main event thanking the largest legitimate live crowd for wrestling in the building in over a decade, but noted there were still empty seats to fill, still work to be done. Then there was Sanshiro Takagi's vow to stage the first non New Japan paid card in the building by 2020.

The Yomiuri Giants had moved into the Big Egg in 1988. If Korakuen Stadium's 51 years of service was anything to go by, it would appear that the Tokyo Dome's life was more than halfway over. Now one of six dome stadiums in Japan, with the 2020 Tokyo Olympics on the horizon, it would be understandable for a different, more modern facility to capture the imagination of wrestling promoters and fans. Yet this doesn't seem to be the case. Running, and running well in the Tokyo Dome looks to still be the metric of a successful Japanese promotion, even as the building's history spanned its fourth decade. As the venue's history grew, many more promotions and many more performers would look to make their own mark on history underneath the egg's shell. The same seems to still be the case as the building turns thirty.

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[1] Owned by the Hanshin electric company, the Osaka Tigers have played at Koshien stadium since 1939, with the building undergoing massive expansion from 2007-2011 rather than moving the team entirely.
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